

**TRUE STORIES OF A
MEDIocre WRITER
(Working Title)**

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BY

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Dedication

This story is dedicated to any creative person who has ever held feelings of self-doubt about their artistic abilities; are obsessed by perfection; and have started projects and are unable to finish them.

Many thanks to the writers forced into online writing groups who held me accountable while writing this book hiding out during COVID-19 self-isolation.

The Accidental Author

“You ask a bartender or waiter around here, ‘What do you do?’ They say, ‘I’m an actor,’ ‘I’m a singer,’ ‘I’m a student,’ ‘I’m a writer.’ After a couple of years, you have to be honest with yourself. ‘I’m a bartender,’ ‘waiter...’...waitress.’ Life is what happens to you while you're waitin' for your ship to come in.” - Uma Thurman as Glory the waitress who used to call herself an actress in *Mad Dog and Glory* (1993)

My name is Alan and I’m a mediocre writer. I didn’t wake up one morning when I was a kid and say to myself, “Someday, I want to be an author and write the Great American novel.” I think in the school aptitude survey I said I wanted to be a policeman.

We all have our origin stories. Why I ended up writing this book revolves around my true story that began in 2006 after being laid off two real jobs in three years. I’ll recount the various ships that came into port, and I boarded. All of them led someplace and eventually where I’ve ended up today as a full time writer.

If a guy like me who has boarded and disembarked any number of ships through a lifetime can end up as an accidental author, anyone can.

Growing up, my parents didn’t steer me towards any particular interest. My dad worked for wages. He started out at the Coca Cola Bottling Company in Cheyenne, Wyoming in my

hometown and clawed his way up to manage production and stayed with Coke for 46 years retiring from the same job in Laramie, 45 miles west.

When I was born, Mom stayed at home with me and a couple years later, my sister came along. After my sister and I were in college, she eventually went back to work. After retiring from that she started up “Sumiko’s Art” which was a successful art business that was active literally up until the moment she died suddenly of a brain aneurysm.

If anything rubbed off on me, was that expectation of upward mobility. My parents were products of the American Way by choice, but even more so following World War II, when there was still quite a bit of racial prejudice toward Japanese, including in Cheyenne. Blending in was a matter of survival.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but it took a lot of courage for my parents to stick it out in Cheyenne after World War II that ended with the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.

That must have been sobering. I can’t remember the atomic bomb ever being discussed, except a family TV activity watching a movie with Gregory Peck and Eva Gardner called *On the Beach* (1959) about the world after World War III.

It could have been because the possibility of nuclear war was ever present. The Cuban missile crisis in 1962 was on everyone’s minds, too. That was a time of international tension when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev installed medium and intermediate range nuclear missiles in Cuba after the botched U.S. Bay of Pigs invasion. President Kennedy and Khrushchev finally agreed that the missiles would be dismantled.

Cheyenne was the command center for the U.S. Air Force Atlas nuclear missile program in the 1960s. The highest concentration of nuclear missiles was sited in southeast Wyoming.

When I was growing up in Cheyenne, post World War II xenophobia amplified because the Heart Mountain war relocation center, one of 10 dispersed through the United States interior, was located in northeast Wyoming.

After Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Empire of Japan on December 7, 1941, there was widespread hysteria that followed. In April of 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 that ordered approximately 120,000 Japanese, mostly American citizens residing on the West Coast to be sorted and transported to 10 relocation camps.

The Heart Mountain camp population numbered 10,000 to 14,000 Japanese isolated behind barbed wire. At the time, Heart Mountain camp was the third largest city in the state behind Casper and Cheyenne. They remained there until the end of the War.

The Japanese threat was replaced by a new one. This time from Communism and the Russians, marking the beginning of the Cold War.

Despite all that, my dad was able to save enough to buy a small house on the gateway to the “other side of the tracks.” The Wyoming Alien Land Act was enacted in 1946. The Act prohibited the sale of land to Japanese immigrants once they were released from the Heart Mountain camp.

I’m pretty sure they entrusted my parents with at least some of their money. My dad invested in vacant land east of town. They eventually sold that which enabled us to move into the suburbs of east Cheyenne.

We were now living the American Way during the 1960s - ranch home, two cars, two kids, and a neighborhood swimming pool.

All the neighbor kids walked a few blocks to Fairview Elementary School. I think getting to know my schoolmates outside of the classroom was a good thing. Since we all charged through

one another's homes, that gave me insight into the lifestyles of families, other than my family and extended families. I learned to live in two worlds, that of my Japanese family, and the other, the neighborhood.

My parents wanted better for us, which is one of the main reasons we moved to the Cole Addition. Mom was at the top of her high school class, but chose to get married and become a stay-at-home mom. My maternal grandparents were in town.

Her sister Hisako, ended up going to college, and eventually retired from a mid-level management career at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). She didn't marry. Their brother George was in a mixed race relationship. He and Auntie Perry were married elsewhere since mixed race marriages were unlawful in Wyoming until 1965. The U.S. Supreme Court in the landmark decision in *Loving v. Virginia* struck down miscegenation laws nationally in 1967.

Going to college wasn't ever on my father's mind. He had a big family based in Cheyenne, including my grandparents and five of 12 brothers and sisters. We had plenty of relatives around that provided lots of family support. Holidays were always a blast.

The Cole Addition suburb was a good place to grow up, garage doors always open, the neighbors all knew each other. The smells of suburbia were unmistakable. On Saturday mornings, the putt putt putt of Pratt and Whitney mower engines puffed out a mixture of oil and gasoline exhaust.

Later in the afternoon, those smells were replaced by the smoke from barbecue grill briquettes heating up after being "flamed on" with that low-grade lighter fluid, and hamburger grease filling the air at weekend parties during warm and still summer evenings.

I didn't get out much back then, and still more of homebody. I don't know if there was any

differentiation between introverts and extroverts. There's a personality measurement tool called the Meyers – Briggs test. I've taken it several times and based on how I respond to various situations, the survey says, I'm an introvert – INFP, to be exact. If you're curious to what that means, it is easily googled.

There aren't many INFPs in the world, which explains my connection to other INFPs and why I was a loner growing up and easily self entertained, and still can immerse myself in my writing with no other distractions.

I was close to a few of the neighbor kids, but beyond that, I was very content to sort out my baseball cards by myself or work on any variety of art projects, which is what I was the best at in school.

All I wanted to do was make art, but pesky arithmetic classes and reading books I didn't understand always disrupted my childhood workflow.

What did I end up being when I grew up? It wasn't by my choice, but I see it as my destiny. A funny thing happened while I was waiting for my ship to come in, I got tired of waiting and boarded another one instead, and kept boarding different ships.

The most recent time I came ashore, I became a storyteller who writes the true tales of students, writers, bartenders, and waiters.

If another interesting ship comes to dock, I'll climb onto that one to see where it leads.

Over the past few months during CoronaVirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) self-isolation, I've been able to catch up on my writing and chronicle my experiences during the pandemic. I've been putting some of it off, and that turned out to be a good thing. My cathartic muses are good fodder that nicely update my redux stories with current event angles.

A funny thing happened

What's the difference between being a writer or an author? I did a google search and found that there are subtle but striking differences between the two terms.

A writer is someone who organizes their words around any variety of formats, poems, short stories, books, screenplays and the various genres that go along with each.

I would add business-related writing, like technical reports, grants, work memos and the like. An author is a writer who has been published, or presented a work at a formal meeting.

Those are very broad classifications and a broader range who should be referring to themselves writers and authors.

Before June 7, 2019 I mostly wrote scripts for documentary movies. Then a weird thing happened that day. I've been a writer for quite some time. I had to write a lot when I had desk jobs, and most recently as a creative nonfiction writer with a few fictional screenplays and one act stage plays in the mix.

I didn't know much about the business of writing and signed up to attend the Wyoming Writers Inc. annual conference in Laramie.

I'm originally from Wyoming, and Laramie is near Boulder, Colorado where I live now. When it comes to getting my work to market, I'm a firm believer in focusing on familiar places where I've already formed relationships. The arts community in Wyoming is small and collegial and I would likely know at least a few people at the meeting.

Plus, part of the registration fee included a meeting with a publisher the day before the conference.

"Hmm, talking with publishers would be a good way to get some questions answered," I said to myself. I know a few things about the small market movie production business, but zilch about

book publishing.

“Maybe this is the time I bounce my story idea off a publisher,” I thought to myself thinking about a story that’s been rattling around in my head for 30 years. A month before, I self-published a picture book entitled *Beyond Heart Mountain*, That was a work that I put together that was the basis of my memoir idea. I slipped a copy into my bag.

The next afternoon, I randomly selected a publisher from the list at the sign up desk, and picked an appointment time.

It was a typical summer day in Laramie, sunny with a slight breeze that kept the dry air circulating. I waited my turn in the lobby at the University of Wyoming conference center where the pitch sessions were taking place. There were authors in coats and neckties, others in sensible dresses rehearsing their speeches, sorting out spiral binders, reviewing their flip charts, pacing around. “What have I gotten myself into?” was my immediate thought.

I was there with a pitch typed up on a piece of paper, wearing my usual gray T-shirt and jeans. I did remember to pull on my boots before leaving the house.

Having been on a few TV and movie sets, the work clothes brand of choice is Carhartt. When I helped irrigate the Arapaho Farm in a past life, Carhartt was also the preferred brand when I was a sodbuster. I’m generally covered with my Wyoming wardrobe choices, but for a writing conference? I wasn’t so sure.

The meeting lasted 30 minutes. I’m invited into the little room, exchange a few pleasantries and answer a couple icebreaker questions with a publisher.

“I do have a story in mind,” I said while handing her the piece of typewritten paper and the picture book. She perused my pitch and flipped through my photos.

“Can you send me a full manuscript?” she said rather assuredly.

So between June and October I write 80,000 words and email them to her.

On November 14, 2019, I get a book contract by email and after signing it, I became an accidental author.

How the hell did all that happen?

Since I really didn't know jack about the process writers generally go through from premise to publication, and still don't, I asked a friend of mine from Lander, who was also in attendance.

“What?” Marjane asked, rather surprised. “Congratulations, that's a good thing. I've never heard of that happening before.”

I decided to share with other writers my unorthodox lessons learned while sailing around seas unknown. While this book is focused on writing, it's applicable to other creative industries like movie making, which is my first art form.

After perusing titles on Amazon, there are any number of books out there about overcoming writer's block, story structure, character development, plots, short cuts, how to get published, etc. I'll touch on some of that, but encourage you to read those, because my experience doesn't fit the formula.

The publisher has first right of refusal on anything I send them, including movie rights. It's like having a committed relationship. No more hanging out in bars, no more blind dates, no more trolling dating websites. My biggest fear in life is to end up as the old guy at the club. At least in my art world, that's not going to happen, thankfully.

Getting this “book deal” was a big motivator. I want to be around other writers. I was having coffee with a friend of mine in Fort Collins. Jennifer is a successful entrepreneur in her own right. She developed a unique invention, and now plies her entrepreneurial tendencies to her fine art business.

One morning we met to brainstorm a social justice concept she has. It was early and quiet, then all of a sudden the long table in the middle of the room was abuzz with people with computers.

“Who are they?” I asked as we moved to an adjacent table. “That’s a writing group. They’re here on Monday morning,” she explained.

Come to find out, it’s a Meet Up social media website group called “Shut Up and Write” (SU&W). I joined the group but didn’t make it to any live get-togethers. Fort Collins is an hour north of Boulder. I’d end up spending twice as much time in the car than in the 90-minute writing session. I didn’t make it to any live meetups.

Probably in February, I joined a face-to-face MeetUp writing group in Boulder that convened on Saturday mornings on University Hill adjacent to the CU campus. Parking is a big pain in Boulder, but I figured out how to get there on the bus. Boulder has very reliable mass transportation.

Shortly thereafter, COVID-19 pretty much shut everything down, which is frustrating to me because I was just getting my writing fires burning. To keep my creative embers glowing, I joined a half-dozen online versions of SU&W groups - including in Fort Collins. MeetUps now stream on a variety of platforms, including ZOOM. They happen, pretty much 24-7 originate from worldwide venues.

Anyone who says, they can’t find time to write, doesn’t really want to write.

Since getting laid off a couple jobs and reinventing myself, as a screenwriter and now a memoir writer, I haven’t looked back. Most of my work is around scripts for documentaries funded by various grants and then adapted into books. Now, there’s the possibility that my movies will be funded through the publisher.

COVID-19 totally messed up three documentary projects because all the stories changed. Not surprisingly, their redux versions are pandemic related. COVID-19 turned out to be a great way of writing them to establish the stories during a weirdly historic time period.

I was a starving artist before COVID-19, still a starving artist during COVID-19, and will be a starving artist after COVID-19. In a sense, the world and I have finally caught up to one another. Now that the economy is flattened out, I think it's a great time for creative types to flourish.

What I've learned from attending several SU&W online groups, there are at least 15,000 people who are struggling to get their writing projects finished.

The most consistent SU&W group I attend is convened by a woman named Lauren, who lives in Bend Oregon. It happens daily from 7 to 9am-ish Mountain Time. Each morning 20-or-so folks log in from Japan, Scotland, Germany, China, Kenya, and all over the U.S.

The group has become very collegial. At this moment, it's Saturday at 6am Mountain Time and I'm editing with a SU&W group based in Thessaloniki, Greece.

I figured out the main tactical purpose of these groups is that of accountability. At the beginning of the session, everyone gives a brief introduction and what they hope to accomplish. Writing time generally spans anywhere from 45 minutes to 90 minute, followed by an accountability debrief.

Since I'm a relative neophyte in the book business world, I lack street cred. As such, I have mostly shared my storytelling process with co-housing community developers who want an interesting story to sell homes.

I think the same principles hold true for the creative industries. Sharing your story with

others in a concise and compelling way is important if you want to be noticed.

This is the first time I've adapted it for writers and other creative types who want, or thinking about wanting, or maybe thinking about wanting to make money while they are sleeping, from sales of their creative work. My disclaimer, I may be totally out to lunch, but then again, I like to eat my own cooking.

Maybe it was the boots.

Learning curve

When I was unemployed, I joined a screenwriting workshop for a couple years and couldn't quite get on track. The concept of "story" was a mystery to me. I understood the mechanics of the Three Act structure, but it didn't make any sense.

Afterwards, I figured out that my style isn't to write linearly. The process for this particular class was to write straight through from beginning to end. How we commented on each other's work was to present x-number of pages to the group and ask for feedback. The problem with this approach, there isn't any context to the rest of the story. So there were never any useful suggestions about how the x-pages fit into the story arc.

It was frustrating because it took a long time to finish anything longer than a 10 page short screenplay.

A couple of my friends talked about a three-day seminar called "Story" by a script doctor named Robert McKee. The curriculum is based on his book of the same name. I signed up for the class.

He's a somewhat gruff, "matter-of-fact" guy. If you've ever watched a movie called *Adaptation* (2002) about frustrated screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (Nicholas Cage), McKee is portrayed in one of his workshop sessions, which is pretty much what his real life presentation is

like.

He says “turn off your phones” and not a minute later one goes off in the Directors Guild of America auditorium. He commands that the offender come on stage, is chided and gives up his phone for the rest of the session.

I have to say that those three days in New York City were life changing. Before, I was trying to learn about storytelling intellectually, rather than emotionally. I was a prolific writer, but now my words had feelings.

What that meant for me was to write about what I know best, which are my experiences, my motivations, my fears, my dreams; as opposed to trying to fabricate them.

The highest hurdle I had to get over was coming to grips with myself and get comfortable in my own skin knowing it’s okay to be vulnerable telling my true stories. After I got used to exposing myself in various stages of undress, writing became more fluid and less intimidating.

What that meant for me was, I was no longer scared to write about what I know best, which are my experiences, my motivations, my fears, my dreams; as opposed to trying to fabricate them or copy the reactions that belong to other scared people.

The highest hurdle I had to get over was coming to grips with myself and get comfortable in my own skin knowing it’s okay to be vulnerable telling my true stories.

After I got used to exposing myself in various stages of undress, writing became more fluid and less intimidating.

Fast forward to 2013. In December, I was ill with an oddball lung disease called pneumocystis pneumonia (PCP) and flat on my deathbed for six weeks. For the previous six months, I was mostly in denial to avoid being scared about it.

Then the ambulance pulled up in front of the house.

I like to have a close call every 20 years or so as a hedge against the unknown. This is likely my last life-altering event, before I have one left to alter.

During that six week period, my life passed before my eyes and brought a huge moment of clarity about needing to be in better touch with friends, family, and myself through writing and movie making.

Considering I should be dead and not writing this book, my brush with death when I rose from the dead was a life-altering experience.

While I was flat on my back, I was well intended to do some writing, edit video, and complete the paperwork for a big production in Jackson, Wyoming. I was optimistic that I would be out before Christmas, then it was New Years, then it became indeterminate.

Every year, I coordinate video production for the Boulder International Film Festival (BIFF) that I would be unable to do. That put the BIFF in a lurch, and they did find someone to take over my role, but for me, I felt like I let down the festival.

I was in no frame of mind to do anything functional, except watch endless episodes of *Pawn Stars* and *Law and Order* reruns.

Because I thought this was a short hospital stay, I was sure I would be able to complete my project obligations. Learning to ask for help was a life skill I wasn't very good at doing. Being totally helpless shocked me into having to ask for help. Keep in mind here, that I was trying to keep my illness under wraps, which worked for awhile until project due dates neared.

In addition to the BIFF gig, I was also contracted by the state of Wyoming to produce video tributes for Governor Matt Mead's art award recipients. Luckily my production pal, Michael, agreed to do the job. Another good friend, Barbara, coordinated the Wyoming artist tributes with Michael. She is also really good with finances and finished the Jackson, Wyoming production

accounting.

If you think that when you're on your deathbed and you want to recount the experience, be sure you have a good intern.

It was the first time I was truly helpless and beholden to people making \$10 an hour. CNAs tirelessly turned me over so I would avoid bed sores, and changed the bed linens, and wiped my butt. Nurses came in at all hours to take my temperature, and change my bandages.

When I was released, they did it all over and over again, and again for the next group of sick people.

"I just like helping people, no matter what," a Licenced Practical Nurse (LPN) said after I asked her about her job. "It gives me a good feeling knowing I helped someone get better."

She was quite the optimist, considering everyone on the staff knows how all the patients are doing at any given moment.

I was homebound in a wheelchair for three months, had to relearn how to walk, and breathed supplemental oxygen for another couple of months, I had plenty of time to reflect about my own mortality.

My first outing was opening night at the BIFF on February 13, 2014. One of my occupational therapies was to cut together a tribute for Shirley McClain, who was a festival guest that year.

Every summer, I made an appointment to see my pulmonologist. This year was the last visit I made before he retired a few days after I saw him. We recalled the time I was just released out of rehab. I was still pretty sick and we talked about options, including a lung transplant. I asked why he didn't recommend pulling the plug on me.

"I had a feeling you were going to make it," he said. "You ended up having such a miraculous recovery, I don't know what I would talk about at medical conferences."

In addition to my supportive lung doctor, I attribute my vascular surgeon as the guy who actually saved my life. He somehow figured out I had a septic ulcer that made me the most sick and repaired it during an emergency surgery, that was a week before the lung biopsy.

I became a University of Michigan fan because a laboratory figured out what was causing my lungs to deteriorate.

Go Wolverines!

Since then I've entered self-imposed hospice. Not that I plan on actually being dead anytime soon, but I'm very introspective, live life to the fullest, and keep telling my true stories, sentence by sentence, and word by word, to paraphrase Anne Lamott.

I've been in touch with bygone grade school classmates, former work colleagues, and family members getting our bands back together for one final tour.

I'd rather have my last association with you when I still have my wits about me, and am able to get around without a walker, "We just wanted to stop by and spend a few minutes of quality time with you."

Quality time?

Where were you when my eyes were glazed from being overdosed on morphine, and I could still remember your name? I hope life events don't shock you into writing like what happened to me - job layoffs, going broke, nearly dead.

Since then I've entered self-imposed hospice. Not that I plan on actually being dead anytime soon, but I'm very introspective, live life to the fullest, and keep telling my true stories.

After recovering, I hadn't done much writing except documentary scripts. I signed up for a class for people with writer's block at the Denver-based writing workshop where I first learned screenwriting craft. The class was essentially four workshops about accountability.

Now I thought my writing was rusty, but there were some would-be writers in the class who were really stuck. I'd say mostly because of lack of confidence and inability to write from their guts.

They would rather clean the house than write. Some of my workshop-mates explained that the excuses were based in some sort of fear around confronting their stories. I get that and don't mean to minimize personal events which likely range from traumatic and disturbing to heartwarming and inspiring.

The learning curve is steep and I was still not in the frame of mind to get this memoir project off the ground. The right ship hadn't docked for me yet.

Self-doubt or Self-confidence?

"I wonder what it would be like if we all became what we wanted to be when we grew up? I mean, imagine a world filled with nothing but firemen, cowboys, nurses and ballerinas." - Lily Tomlin

I'm a member of many Shut Up and Write (SU&W) groups. Writers with different motivations and equally diverse creative processes, including myself, sign up for two or three sessions per day. Some are full time writers, but most do something else and cram their writing into whatever occupies their time, likely a job.

In one of the early morning groups there was a conversation that came up around, "At what point does self-doubt become confidence, and when do you call yourself a writer?"

I think this would hold true to anyone who practices any art - a painter, a sculptor, a dancer, a filmmaker.

I've been writing since I was 13 starting with *The Tumbleweed*, my Carey Junior High

School newspaper.

Over the years I referred to myself as a columnist or reporter when I wrote for a newspaper, a screenwriter after a movie I wrote screened at a film festival, a playwright when I wrote a play that was performed before a paid audience.

I didn't refer to myself as an author, until I signed the *Beyond Heart Mountain* book deal in November 2019.

My thought, if you write anything for others to read including yourself, you're a writer. Did you ever have to diagram sentences? I'd say those visualizations are how writing became operationalized to me in Miss Smith's 7th grade English class. She was a tallish attractive blonde and my first teacher crush.

After kindergarten, Laramie County School District #1 changed the school boundaries. Had we stayed in our old house, I would have had to attend Alta Vista by crossing Logan Avenue, which was a busy street. In my mom's mind, she thought Alta Vista was not as good a school compared to Fairview.

We moved to the east Cheyenne suburb of Cole Addition so as to stay in the Fairview school neighborhood. My first grade teacher was Mrs. Stogsdill. She was a bit of a battle-axe and instilled plenty of self doubt in me.

It was more like she was the messenger for the system that made me feel like I didn't know what I was doing, but somehow I always had the courage to deal with it. Her demeanor didn't help. Mrs. Stogsdill walked around the classroom wielding a yardstick that struck like a cobra from three feet away, whacking kids on the crown of their head or rapping their knuckles almost out of nowhere.

At least at Fairview, kids were vetted based on how well we could read and comprehend

information. I had trouble with both. I was a slow reader and didn't get the context of any of it. The good readers soared in a group called the Eagles, the in between readers got the early worm with the Robins. The bad readers, like me, foraged crumbs with the Sparrows.

I was always a Sparrow. It was demeaning because I did like to read, but not about Dick, Jane, Sally, Puff and Spot - fiction wasn't my thing. I didn't understand the relevance.

“See Dick run, run, run, run ...”

“Yes, he's running, all right, but why, why, why, why ...?”

The Cowardly Lion was a hero figure for me. He had courage, and didn't know it because, as pointed out by the *Wizard of Oz* (1939) he is a “victim of disorganized thinking.” Courage comes from the wisdom that's within. I had courage, but just didn't realize it, because I did read in my spare time, but not Dick and Jane.

Despite what I was told to read, I read what I wanted, like the *Book of Knowledge* encyclopedia, or the world almanac, or the *Weekly Reader*, or the *Thesaurus* - what's another word for *Thesaurus*? My interest was nonfiction. Had we been separated out by fiction and nonfiction, I would have become a better reader.

I progressed as a good speller, at par with the Eagles group. My teachers were always so surprised that a Sparrow was one of the best spellers in the class, and that gave me confidence. Spelling was my super power.

It must have been at my 10-year East High School reunion in the summer of 1981. That year the get together was at Little America in west Cheyenne. It was an unusually wet summer, but not like the click-click-clack cicada summers I experienced in Nebraska while in college there.

I walked from my hotel room to the conference center through the golf course. Humidity

jumped off the manicured fairways and clung to my bare and Teva-tanned ankles. There's nothing that reminds me of summer like the aroma of fresh cut grass clippings.

At the reception that night, I ran into Mrs. Stogsdill in the heavy appetizers buffet line. Opening the covers to the chafing pans, wafted steam infused with the bouquet of Swedish meatballs onto my glasses. Her daughter is a year younger than me, which is why she was there.

“Do you remember me? Mrs. Stogsdill asked.

“Yes, I do. You taught me how to read.”

When I wait in line at the Ikea store snack bar, the Swedish meatball smell reminds me of that night.

I think she appreciated hearing that, and one of those little confidence builders. Over the years, I've learned that I just never know what influence I may have on someone or they on me. Being at the top of my game all the time, not burning bridges, being helpful as much as practical, that's hard work and an important life skill.

Remember what you've forgotten

I try to keep the gap between the past and present as short a time period as possible. When I get a feeling of low confidence, sometimes I flash back to Tony Manaro in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) strutting down the sidewalk with a can of paint in one hand and two slices of New York style pizza folded over in a paper plate, or *Rocky* (1976) charging up the stairs of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and fist pumping at the top.

Other times, my mind goes back to those times when I was recognized and my confidence boosted.

My go-to story is the time I was in fifth grade basketball. Back then I was small, but had

pretty good skills. One game was a “road trip” to Eastridge School, and I was so happy to have made the traveling squad. We had neighborhood schools. There was no “choicing” and all kids progressed together. There were two boys who were always the best athletes. Everyone at Fairview had to compete against them in sports all the way through high school.

The team met after the last bell rang. We dressed out before loading up in a Yellow Dog and bussed a few miles north. For the occasion, my dad gave me a gym bag to carry my clothes. He was a pretty good player and lived his basketball vicariously through me. He could go to his left pretty well and had a good hook shot. Even though I wasn't that good compared to the other giants on my team. It was the first time I'd been in a school other than Fairview.

That game at Eastridge was life changing for me. The two stars on the team were both having bad games. Coach puts me in. I played pretty good defense, stole the ball a couple times and made a couple baskets.

“That O’Hashi had a pretty good game,” the coach told the team at practice the next day. That was the first time I remember being singled out for excelling by someone other than a relative.

To this day, I always give people a chance if they say, “I can do this.”

I doubt, of all the hundreds of players who went through the Fairview basketball program, my coach knew what a positive influence he had on me at that moment sitting on the gym floor when I was in the fifth grade.

At least in my case, sometimes confidence gives way to self-doubt that plays out as a defense mechanism. In the spring of 1985, I was home for lunch break and the phone rang.

“Hello,” I answered.

“Is this, Alan O’Hashi?” a woman’s voice asked. “This is the McCorkle Casting.”

I was confused. At the time I worked for the city government in Lander, Wyoming.

“Casting company? Why is a concrete pipe company wanting to talk to me?” I thought to myself before saying anything. “Who is this again?”

“McCorkle Casting. Your name was given to me by Kathy Wilson,” the woman explained. “We’re casting for a movie and you come highly recommended.”

“Recommended for what,” I thought while answering.

“Yes, I know Kathy Wilson,” I said. “Is this my Hastings College classmate Kathy Wilson?” I mused to myself. Kathy and I were both speech jocks at school. We hadn’t been in touch for years.

“Well Ron Howard is casting a movie called *Gung Ho* and he is interested in you to play the part of Kaz Kazahiro,” the agent said. “Are you interested?” As it turned out, this was the supporting role opposite Michael Keaton.

Keep in mind, the only time Kathy had seen me act is when we both had roles in a children’s theater play. I was typecast as the King of Siam.

“Yeah, okay, what do I need to do?” I asked.

“That’s all for now, we’ll be in touch,” she said before hanging up.

I didn’t know what to make of it, but I later tracked down Kathy’s phone number from our mutual friend, Tom. He was one of my frat brothers and lives on the Upper Westside in New York City. I explained to him what happened.

“That Kathy,” he said. I rang her up later. She has a big bellowing laugh.

“Ha! We were sitting around her apartment having drinks and talking about Ron Howard’s movie. I immediately thought of you!” Kathy chuckled. “Do it, I heard they already cast somebody, but check it out anyway.”

In the meantime, I sought advice from a couple of the more experienced actors I knew in town (Whatever that would be worth in Lander, population 7,000). They weren't exactly encouraging, maybe feeling a bit jealous, in retrospect.

I don't know, but their comments left self doubt in my mind. I called McCorkle casting back the next day and sure enough, Gedde Watanabe was cast in the role.

"Should I come out?" I asked.

"The picture is cast, if you come, you'll have to pay your own way. No guarantees, but you're welcome to come out," she said, discouraging me. Having resonated with my friend's advice, it was an easy decision to stay put in Wyoming.

A year later, *Gung Ho* (1986) opened at the Grand Theater in Lander on May 2nd, my birthday. The story is about a struggling American car manufacturer in Pennsylvania that is bought up by a Japanese corporation that wants to transform the slacker American workers more interested in their interpersonal relationships into regimented corporate robots.

To date, that's my biggest "What if?" moment I've experienced. The movie opening on my birthday is one of those weird signs, and I should have gone against conventional wisdom. I'll never know how, or if my life would have changed, just making the trip to Hollywood.

Now, whenever presented with far out opportunities, I muster up the courage to jump on them and worry about the consequences later. I apply that "can-do" courage to my creative projects.

Have you ever spent \$20 on a book or paid \$15 for a movie ticket and afterwards you say to yourself, "How did that book get published, it was so bad?" or "What was that studio thinking when they made that bad movie?" The answer is likely, a lousy storyteller who got a break.

Those experiences in themselves should move you to say, "I can do this."

Write your story

Are you a writer who hides from your life story and tries to write the story of others? I think stories that aren't told from the guts end up being a little too squeaky clean and therefore superficial and shallow.

Are you embarrassed about the time you were busted for shoplifting and had to tell your dad about it, or you'd be arrested in school the next day?

Are you afraid people may think you're a braggart if you tell them about the time you were pushing your cart through a grocery store aisle and came upon a woman who was blue in the face from a seizure, stopped and opened her airway before the EMTs arrived?

Telling your true stories about your life experiences takes courage - the good, the bad, and the ugly.

When you add depth to your characters, or description of events and places, remember back to how you responded to pressure and stress; or happiness and elation, how the surroundings made you feel, what they smelled like, rather than speculating about how someone else may have responded.

The rare times I write fiction, the entire story ends up being based on my life experiences but with some other time and place as the backdrop. There are only about 20 basic plots into which to adapt your story, some will be better fits than others. Have confidence in writing what you know best, which is yourself.

You may have heard or read about the experiences of others, but your conjecture will largely be intellectual, unless you add depth by translating your emotions to paper.

I mostly write and make movies about reality and the topics are generally first person

accounts within the context of the storyline. For example, what were you doing on September 11, 2001?

I was on the bus heading into Denver for work when I first heard about the 9/11 attacks. It was a nondescript day for me. For some reason, I wasn't watching the *Today Show* or listening to *Morning Edition* on NPR. It wasn't until I was on the bus on my way to work in Denver that I heard any inkling about the planes careening into the World Trade Center towers.

In 2001, news moved fairly slowly, unlike the moment-to-moment news cycle of today.

That night I talked to my mom about it. I became obsessed about getting to New York City.

"What's it like being there?" I thought after returning home from work. I couldn't get through to my friend, Tom. I was pretty sure he was okay. He lives near the W. 72nd and Broadway subway station and a distance away from Ground Zero.

The Yankees won the American League pennant and would soon play in the World Series against the Arizona Diamondbacks. The games were delayed until the end of October because of the attacks.

"It's either now or never," I said to myself about an activity on my list of things to do. Airplane tickets were cheap and this was before the time of big-time sporting event ticket scams. I bought ducats for games 3 and 4 at Yankee Stadium and had them fedexed to the Hotel Pennsylvania, which is where I stay when in New York City. It's right across the street from Penn Station, and very handy, plus I like staying in historic hotels.

I've conjectured that the renowned photographer Alfred Stieglitz stayed at the Hotel Pennsylvania where he anxiously waited for his wife, Georgia O'Keeffe, to return on the train from her first sojourn to New Mexico in 1929. Their relationship was never the same after that

trip.

Why I even thought about this is because Miss O’Keeffe and her sister, Claudia, spent the summer of 1917 in Ward, Colorado, a small mining town just north of Boulder. On their return train trip to Texas, rains diverted their route to Santa Fe where Miss O’Keeffe fell in love with the landscapes of New Mexico. In a thank you note she wrote to her host, Hazel Schmoll, she writes, “I don’t know if I like Ward or Santa Fe best.”

The rest of this Georgia O’Keeffe story is history.

What a time to visit New York. I tracked down Tom and we met up at a coffee shop before I ventured Downtown toward Ground Zero. By this time, some of the subways were running. Poking my head out at the top of the station stairs, the air smelled dirty, but not pollution dirty, dusty dirty.

No taxi horns honking, no smell of diesel exhaust from buses. Walking through the canyons of buildings, particulates catch the sunlight like when I walked into our old garage on E. 10th Street and the Jesus beams of light knifed through the cracks of the wooden slats giving life to the darkness now brightened by latent swirling dust.

The occasional times I’m that far Downtown, one of my stops was Downtown Bagels. The storefront closed after the attacks. October 30th was the first day of business in over a month. Walking in, the air was moist and steamy. The stale outdoor air was interrupted by addictive deli aromas, a combination of garlic bagels, pastrami and corned beef in the warming trays behind the counter.

The aromatic atmosphere was abuzz with neighborhood well-wishers and customers, including myself. I ordered my usual corned beef and Swiss on marbled rye. I normally order a Rye, but the sauerkraut would make this sandwich way more messy than it already is.

Whenever I visit New York, I make a stop at Ground Zero. A few years later, when the One World Trade Center Freedom Tower was under construction, Downtown Bagels was closed. There's a hole in the wall Japanese restaurant next door, which is now my lunch stop. I wonder if it'll be open the next time I make it to New York.

I made my way back Uptown and caught the orange line to the Bronx. The opening ceremonies for game 3 were very moving. A tattered flag that flew over Ground Zero was unfurled in the center field end of the stadium.

President Bush arrived by helicopter and threw out the first pitch. Lee Greenwood sang, "I'm Proud to be an American." Everyone in the country was a Yankees fan that night. It was only fitting that the home team won and the next night eked out game four on a spectacular walk-off homer by Derek Jeter in the bottom of the 11th inning to even the series.

"Thank goodness there weren't any Asians involved," my mom lamented to me on our phone call. She was keenly aware of the racism toward Japanese following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. This trip to New York turned out to be the basis for the opening chapter of *Beyond Heart Mountain*.

The Diamondbacks ended up winning the series in seven games on a bloop single by Luis Gonzalez over the head of Yankees reliever Mariano Rivera scoring Craig Counsell. For me, the loss was a big letdown, but scratch the World Series off the bucket list that happened to be played during one of the darkest moments in U.S. history. I doubt I'll make it to another, that's one less thing I have to worry about, but the story is memorialized in *Beyond Heart Mountain*.

Writing in a vacuum

I know there are people who are happy to write for their personal satisfaction by

scribbling inspirations on the backs of envelopes, or in notebooks, or saving profound cookie fortunes neatly organized in a wallet pocket.

But maybe one day, some random person will say to you, “This is really good, you should take your writing more seriously.”

There’s nothing like a few encouraging words that’ll change your heart and build your confidence. I think it’s important to seek out like minds, rather than create in a vacuum.

I’d say most people who work in a desk job, at one level, do write for a living, you know - memos, technical reports, grants. For whatever reasons, you were hired because of a particular expertise that involves self-expression through proper use of words.

“I do a lot of writing in my job,” I’d say when asked what I did working for the local government.

“Oh, you’re a bureaucrat?” would be a usual response.

“No, I’m a writer. Right now I’m developing the story for a big grant application due next week,” was my further explanation. “I become a bureaucrat once the funds are approved and I have to keep track of everything on excel spreadsheets.”

Even if you still work and juggle paying the bills, doing the wash, petting the cat, creating your art, and cram all that into your spare time, I imagine you have a high level of self-confidence in your abilities to do your real job, which is also validated by the transaction at the end of each pay period when you get handed money for your efforts.

The same holds true with writing or any creative endeavor. Like a job, an avocation has to be a priority; maybe a few tasks have to slide as you stuff five pounds of day-to-day tasks into a three pound bag. My observation, the most successful people are the busiest people who say they can’t possibly add one thing to their plate.

I had the *Beyond Heart Mountain* book project on my mind for 30 years and hadn't done much writing because a job got in the way. I was too busy with life and not watching for my ships to come in. Even when I was on a ship, it was sealed up in a vacuum bottle.

I received a small grant for the *Beyond Heart Mountain* project that was supposed to be a documentary movie. Instead, I was hired to compile a historical survey of the West 17th Street Japanese neighborhood before slogging away for a few months compiling the *Beyond Heart Mountain* picture book.

While not perfect, it was finished just in time to fulfill the grant requirement as a completed deliverable. I ended up speaking about the book at a history conference.

If you have something to say, write it down, finish it, and send it someplace. Publications of all kinds are always looking for fresh content, write an op-ed for the local paper, an article for your monthly church newsletter, your college alumni magazine.

While blogging, writing online content are good, and you may even be getting paid, but there's something about reading your work and byline printed on a page for the first time that's better, like your first deep kiss. For me, both were very exhilarating in their own ways.

Having been a small town newspaper writer, I've been published, and paid. I'd say being a fish in that small pond is what sparked my interest in book writing, which was a fallow thought until my life was drastically jolted in 2006.

Stepping off the edge

Everyone is pretty good at something, "He's such a good quilter, always a blue ribbon at the county fair," or "Her handcrafted cabinets are nicer than the Amish," or in my case, "He's such a successful grant writer, nearly 100 percent success rate."

Fundraising jobs in a nonprofit organization is on the expense side of the ledger. Development jobs are expendable. After 9/11, similar to what's happening during the COVID-19 pandemic, discretionary funds dried up, personal giving habits changed. Organizations directly related to the emergency *d'jour* thrived.

Because I'd been raising money for so long, I became over confident when talking my way into working for nonprofits. I sobered up after being laid off twice from a couple pretty good organizations.

That knocked me down a notch or two and if I ever had self-doubt in my ability, it was over the next four years.

The first time was 2004. I raised funds for a legal advocacy program for domestic violence victims. That was the toughest money to come by but also the most satisfying.

My second time in the bread line was 2006, after being laid off from an organization that advocated for positive youth development protective factors so as to build resiliency. That group eventually went out of business.

"Do something you've always wanted to do," my friends said. "Learn a new skill," the job counselor told me. I ended up collecting unemployment insurance, getting food stamps, and leveraged those against my student loans.

At this point I decided that I want to try a gig that entails writing, but not for newspapers. What I learned from being in that business, the only people who make any money are newspaper owners. Besides, the internet was starting to take off and hard copy papers were going the way of 8-track tapes.

Maybe something in the electronic media, or movies, that at the same time helps save the

world was appealing.

Opening the vacuum seal

Since I was getting off to a new start, living in a vacuum was not an option. I learned about the importance of building on the spot relationships and began to get out into the Boulder community more.

That came easy to me. I learned the hustle when I was young selling soda pop at the Cheyenne Frontier Days (CFD) parades, and later as a carnival worker cajoling people to give me a dollar for nothing.

My real job life was in Denver. I didn't get out much in Boulder. Each spring, the city of Boulder advertises for citizens to serve on various boards and commissions.

One volunteer position caught my attention. Since I wanted to get back into the media, I applied to be on the Boulder public access TV board. I didn't know much about public access television. On the application, one of the questions asked why I wanted to be on the board. "I like to watch TV," was my response.

Regardless of my lack of technical expertise, the city council picked me to be on the board. Come to find out, the main reason I was selected was to dismantle the station since there were political conflicts with a couple local public access producers about objectionable and unvetted content they aired on TV. My experience with two struggling nonprofit organizations was what won the day for me.

I was to be part of the new regime.

In my past life working for the Lander, Wyoming city administration, the Telecommunications Act of 1984 was passed. The Act continues to provide cities with funding for local access programming on the cable TV system, in exchange for the franchise to do

business in town, and build infrastructure in the rights-of-way.

The three types of access channels: government access that generally air city council meetings for example, educational access for school districts, and public access for citizens to exercise their free speech rights on cable TV.

To fulfill my obligation with the county employment office, in addition to applying for jobs, I ended up taking some TV production classes, learned non-linear video editing on Final Cut Pro, and a friend got me to sign up for some screenwriting workshops.

I haven't looked back.

My unemployment payments were scheduled to end and, meanwhile, the new station manager hired me to be the program director.

That was perfect timing.

I didn't know what that meant, but through my on-the-job training, I put the daily program schedule together.

I eventually was the station manager and executive director of Boulder Community Media (BCM). BCM went out of the public access TV business and evolved into the nonprofit production company that it is today.

I don't know if entrepreneurship is a learned or innate behavior. Regardless, I picked it up from both sides of my family. It first started when I helped my paternal grandfather during the summer. He was always hustling something, a rack of pool at his billiard parlor downtown; selling vegetables at his stand set up next to his restaurant.

After World War II started, my grandfather and uncle were detained in California while sourcing vegetables shortly after Pearl Harbor was bombed. They were detained for several months and when my aunt negotiated their return to Wyoming, they lost their vegetable produce

business. He was forced to do odd jobs and my grandmother went to work as a cook at the City Cafe on West 17th Street that catered mostly to the sizable Japanese crowd in Cheyenne.

Later, my grandmother quit working there and in 1957 opened the Highway Cafe along U.S. 85, aka the South Greeley Highway. It was a good location. Cars were constantly whizzing by. I always liked the smell of gasoline and diesel exhaust, back in the days of leaded fossil fuels.

There were a couple kids about my age who lived across the street at a motel. We stood on the roadside giving the horn honking signal to passing tractor trailers and rewarded by an occasional truck horn blast.

My grandfather resurrected his truck farming business and set up a fruit and vegetable stand next to the cafe. The day-old stock was that day's side dishes - a farm-to-table restaurant before they became trendy. I helped him with point-of-sale displays and signage.

When I'm in the grocery store in the fresh food section and catch a whiff of cantaloupe, I'm immediately drawn back to my grandpa's fruit and vegetable stand. I was allergic to cantaloupe when I was young, but sniffing the ripe melons was good enough for me.

When I wasn't hanging around the cafe swatting flies or washing dishes, I planned all school year to sell pop along the CFD parade route three times during the last full week of July.

That entailed stocking up on cheap grocery store brand canned soda, oiling the wagon wheels, inventorying coolers, and making improvements to the workflow based on the experiences the summer before. The enterprise ended up growing into a four-kid operation with a couple supply depots along the 20-block long parade route.

I got out of that business just in time because over-regulation pretty much killed the parade soda industry. A kid had to get a permit, that entailed having a grownup on site as a

sponsor, and no selling in the street in front of customers but instead on the sidewalk behind the parade spectators.

I have a couple other entrepreneurial war stories.

One is about my fling in food processing. What I learned from that is not to manufacture anything that has a shelf life.

I'd tell the tale, but there are too many people still alive to do the story justice. As the Oscar-winning movie *Fargo* (1996) opens, "At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed. Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred."

The second war story begins when Bill Clinton is elected president. One of his first legislative highlights was the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). His Secretary of Commerce, Ron Brown, sponsored a conference in Denver matching up business people from the U.S. and Mexico. After the session, most everyone scattered, which was odd, because the main part of the event was to build relationships.

There weren't many people in the hall, so I sat down and visited in my broken Spanish with a delegation from a credit union in a small town called Sombrerete, Zacatecas, located in north central Mexico. In Sombrerete, there's a museum located in a home where locals believe Thomas Alva Edison, the prolific inventor was born. Urban legend has it that Edison's father was a miner married to a *zacatecana*.

After some general chit-chat, with everyone at least making themselves understood in broken *español*, they invited me to their little town. I didn't know where I was going, but flew into Guadalajara and took a bus to Sombrerete.

I missed the stop and ended up in the next town called Durango. There was a big *quinceañera* happening, celebrating the 15th birthday of a local girl. The merriment lasted well

into the night. The trip got off to a great start.

After talking to the credit union about the project that was to relocate a manufacturing plant from southern Colorado to assemble hair accessories. The project received financing. In theory, the business was a great example of free-market sustainability. The factory hired home-based sewers to assemble hair ties. Most of the profits were shared with the workers.

There's a reason why *maquilas* (factories) are located on the U.S. - Mexico border closer to markets. The hair accessory factory was in the middle of nowhere and transportation costs doomed the project.

I should have taken this incident as a sign. When one of my business partners and I were stopped by a roadblock we were held at machine gun point by federal police who busted me for working without a proper visa.

I was busted for being an illegal immigrant in Mexico.

Most times, I'd fly to Mazatlan as a tourist and stay over for a few days then either take the bus or fly over the mountains to Durango. Working in Zacatecas on a Jalisco tourist visa was probable cause to shake me down.

When I was detained, the police worked my partner over in Spanish and me in English, hoping we would tell conflicting stories.

President Clinton and the President of Mexico Ernesto Zedillo had just inked a pact setting up cooperative drug enforcement between the two countries. I think the cops were searching for drugs.

After being shaken down twice, we were let go after no contraband was uncovered. I ended up getting the proper papers at the Mexican Embassy in Denver, but soon parted ways with Zacatecas, mostly because the brains of the operation died of colon cancer shortly

thereafter. His brother moved the business even further south to Mexico City.

Setbacks like this are discouraging, particularly since it was a productive venture for five years. It wasn't all for nothing, I learned about how to manufacture in another country and how brokers and agents are the ones who make the most money with the least amount of effort.

I just didn't get out soon enough.

This is useful information as I figure out how to scale creative industries.

I think about this challenge every morning. I count my blessings that I do make money as a starving artist, even though I wake up everyday essentially unemployed and constantly having to think about selling the next idea.

Someday, I'll want to stop, but new ships keep coming into port, and I keep boarding.

First connections

In the mid-1980s, publishing a book of my newspaper columns was a project constantly in the back of my mind. I just hadn't gotten around to putting much effort into it because I was always tied down to a job.

I finally got them compiled into an anthology when I acquired my first word processor. It was a notebook Radio Shack TRS-80 100. I like small and compact versions of stuff and this was perfect. I had peripherals such as a floppy disk drive and a dot matrix printer.

During self-isolation, I've had time to sort through boxes filled with personal detritus I hadn't handled since they were packed away. The other day, I came across a manuscript dated December 10, 1987. I had forgotten the title - *Wyoming Graffiti*. It was a compilation of newspaper columns I'd written while a columnist at the *Wyoming State Journal*.

My Uncle Jake owned a pretty big company in Cheyenne called Pioneer Printing that

printed all sorts of documents, fine art prints, and also books. When I started working, I had Pioneer Printing do all my big jobs. Even when I lived 250 miles away in Gillette and Lander, meeting him at his shop was always a good excuse for me to drive down and visit him.

One trip, I delivered to him a copy of *Wyoming Graffiti*. I walked in the plant and deafened by the banging of offset printing presses. Then there was the mimeograph machine spitting out sheets of paper with the intoxicating aroma from the blue printing that was a throwback to my childhood.

The best part of school was the days when the teacher distributed mimeographed handouts. Kids held up a sheet to their nose to catch a sniff. That couldn't have been as bad as breathing in leaded gas exhaust fumes.

We went into his office. Jake flipped through the manuscript and connected me to a publisher in Texas who he thought would be interested in my content. It was my first rejection letter, which I still have as a reminder of how close I got.

That was a disappointment, but at the same time a confidence builder. What I learned is, just like everything in life, building relationships is important to making in-roads, including getting my work rejected.

Had my uncle not taken an interest in my story, it wouldn't have gotten as far as it did, which was in front of the eyes of a publisher who did business with Pioneer Printing.

Curiosity

I write about lots of stuff and am most curious about obscure historical information, thus my rejected anthology of Wyoming vignettes back in 1987. I have since learned that the individual

pieces should have been stitched together as a memoir, but in the 1980s, memoirs by regular people weren't really a popular genre until the 21st century.

One of my columns in that manuscript entitled "Beyond Heart Mountain" is about a day trip I took to visit the World War II Japanese relocation center in Park County located in northeast Wyoming 100 miles or so, east of Yellowstone National Park.

Life happened, and my ship - albeit a dinghy - came in, because of this back story.

There once was a vibrant Japanese neighborhood in downtown Cheyenne particularly on the 400 and 500 blocks of West 17th Street. Oddly, enough, I had forgotten about it until I saw a TV news interview with one of my East High School classmates, John Dinneen.

He appeared before the city of Cheyenne Historic Preservation Board requesting to tear down an old building at 509 W. 17th St.

The structure in question was over 50 years old, and found not to be architecturally significant, but rather, a historic place in Cheyenne because it was the last building standing in what was the heart of the Cheyenne Japanese community.

The Board approved the demolition but with a condition, that a cultural and historical survey be completed of Japanese operated businesses and downtown residents. All that information became the basis of the memoir I wrote called, *Beyond Heart Mountain*, a redux of my 1987 newspaper column.

When the last of my aunts and uncles began to pass away. Most recently, Auntie Helen in Belleville, Illinois, and her son and my cousin, Duane who died of COVID-19, I thought about the day trip I took to the World War II Heart Mountain Japanese relocation center and how that could meld with the Cheyenne Japanese survey.

I didn't have any relatives where were sent there, but my grandfather and uncle George were

in central California sourcing vegetables for the upcoming season

They were there at the wrong time following the signing of Executive Order 9066 by President Roosevelt. They were rounded up and were stuck at the Tulare Assembly Center for several months before Auntie Elsie worked with state and federal law enforcement to get them released back to Wyoming in 1942.

I visited Elsie, which turned out to be the last time, around Christmas 2015. She was in hospice at a Cheyenne long-term care home. She died February 4, 2016. It just never dawned on me that my elderly relatives weren't going to live forever.

I didn't take the time to talk to her about that experience nor much of anything else, for that matter. As I write this, I just remembered she has an oral history filed in the Wyoming State Archives that I've been meaning to check out.

That's another reason I spend so much time trying to organize recollections of my experiences. Writing would be so much more fun if it weren't so time consuming!

My penchant for writing forced me to finish learning about my family history and get back to writing *Beyond Heart Mountain*. I've become the *de facto* family historian. During COVID-19 self-isolation, I've had time on my hands to sort through and handle every photograph spanning three generations.

Some of the people I know, most I didn't, but those pictures all had some meaning or significance to somebody at the time and lament that their stories should have been written down. For this book project, I've written down quite a bit about them to give historical context.

I've slowly pieced information together and made note about the stories I hear, including references in my writing for the benefit of whoever gets to handle the contents of this plastic for the last time.

Since I anecdotally knew quite a bit, I was able to piece together the history of the neighborhood, that also included being reacquainted with some of my childhood friends. Their personal stories and pictures ended up being the basis for a picture book that I made on a web based publishing generally for short runs, like one or two books.

Some friends have published their DIY wedding pictures and family reunion albums on the internet. The online editing systems are very user-friendly, high quality xerographic printing, but pricey. It was good for my short picture book run, *Beyond Heart Mountain*.

My idea was to expand the picture book into a full-length memoir. I didn't know anything about the process to get a full-length book published. It was more like a coffee table book and having a few copies in hand were sort of a "show of force" that I had completed a writing project.

Then the Wyoming Writing, Inc. conference came around when I got my break.

There are always tickets

In the spring of 2019, an email came across my desk from Wyoming Writers Inc., which is, obviously, the trade group for writers in Wyoming. I remember one of my colleagues from Cheyenne, Karen, who wrote entertainment news at the *Wyoming Tribune Eagle*. She told me about the organization, but had forgotten about it until I started working on the *Beyond Heart Mountain* picture book.

I really hadn't hung around with "writer" writers much and didn't know anything about the business of writing. Attending the conference would be a good way to do some networking. I sent in my registration money for the annual meeting held on the University of Wyoming campus in early June.

Karen and I both cover CFD, which is a big rodeo held at the end of July. There are a bunch

of writers and photographers who I see exactly once a year at that show, billed as “The Daddy of ‘em All.” Even though I don’t work for newspapers, I still get media credentials to get into activities of all sorts.

When I wrote for newspapers, I mostly covered sports. Even as a writer for a small town paper like the *Wyoming State Journal* I was able to get into major events, like the NCAA basketball Sweet 16 in Seattle, NFL Broncos games in Denver, or pretty much any college football bowl game. The paper never paid my way, but it was an excuse to go away on a quasi-working vacation.

I maintained my alter ego as a writer because I didn’t want to give up my access to sporting events, concerts, visits by politicians - anything that was a tough ticket.

I was thinking yesterday that writing would be more fun if it wasn’t so time consuming. As a hedge against the constant grind, access to press passes should be a reason why you write.

“I’m a novelist, I’m a poet, I’m a writer,” you may be saying to yourself and scoff, “I’d never qualify for media credentials.”

It is true that passes were once given only to members of the “working press.” As the internet forced newspapers out of business and accelerated the growth of online media information sources, I’m still able to get passes into pretty much anything. There are members of the “press” but there are way more people who are bloggers, freelance photographers with smartphones, who qualify as content producers.

Generally, in the credential application forms, there are general questions about what you will be writing about. In my case, I don’t pitch a story about the event itself, but some related angle or a back story.

In the case of a fiction writer, you may want to go to a big basketball game because the inciting incident of your story happens when the almost dead guy's life passes before his eyes as he floats from the rafters and then slam dunks with a thud on center court as the capacity crowd lets out a collective gasp.

It's not just the game, but other snippets. When doctoring up your over-steamed hot dog on a smushed up bun, sniff the blended aroma of mustard, ketchup, room temperature relish and chopped onions.

What about the young family decked out in their team colors, and the mom keeping track of their toddler who is more interested in the \$12 hockey-puck size pizza than to the game, and irritated at her husband who isn't much help at all.

How about the idle small talk with the guy standing next to you at the urinal. I was at the Imperial Palace in Vegas a number of years ago and met Art Carney, the actor who played Ed Norton on the *Honeymooners* opposite Jackie Gleason. "You don't buy beer, you rent it," he mused. We zipped up and we went our separate ways, and disappeared into the hazy casino floor among the clamor of slot machine bells and cheering at the craps table.

Some big gigs have a stringent vetting process. They want to know circulation, or how many thousands of social media followers, or the number of website hits per month. Those take some creativity.

Remember a movie that won "Best Picture" called *Argo* (2012) with Ben Affleck as CIA agent Tony Mendez who comes up with a ruse to free the Iran hostages holed up in the Canadian ambassador's home by turning them into a Sci-Fi movie production crew scouting locations in Tehran? If you really want to get into an event, sometimes it takes this level of creativity.

If you network around enough, you should be able to find someone who has access. I'll stop

doing this after I crash the Oscars.

I was definitely an outsider at the Wyoming Writers, Inc. conference. Like any crowd, there are the shakers and movers of the organization, with an awards ceremony and election of officers. I met a few writers from around the state who were much like myself and others in my SU&W groups trying to finish and get noticed.

But I was the only one who had a book deal made that weekend.

Get as close as possible

My writing colleague Karen and I first met when a pop band called the Jonas Brothers came on the scene in 2008. I'm pretty sure you get the idea by now, that I like to embed myself into the places I visit and write about experiences with the people I meet. Sometimes getting embedded is intentional, sometimes it's accidental. This time we both had press passes and embedding was intentional.

I was producing for the Boulder public access station at the time in 2008. A young teenage talent named Roxie King was the host of some of our programming and wanted to meet the Jonas Brothers. The three brothers, Joe, Kevin, and Nick are all very talented and became stars on the Disney Channel before going on tour.

"Who are the Jonas Brothers," I asked.

"You don't know the Jonas Brothers? They are big and playing Fiddler's Green in Denver," Roxie excitedly responded. "We can spend the entire day with them starting at the Boondocks then we get to go to the concert!" Boondocks is one of those indoor fun centers that is packed full of trampolines, batting cages, bowling lanes, an outdoor go kart track.

"I looked it up, my mom wrote to see if we can get into the event," she said. I agreed and was able to get us organized to meet the Jonas Brothers. We would embe with the band, its entourage,

and get backstage at the Fiddler's Green Amphitheater, the show venue in Englewood, which is a suburb of Denver.

This wouldn't be my first visit to Fiddler's Green Amphitheater. One time before in 1994, I went to see the Eagles. The band broke up in 1980 and the "When Hell Freezes Over" tour was the first after the band got back together since they released *The Long Run* album.

As time went on, I was surprised there were so few writers on our tour. Nonetheless, we all met at the Boondocks parking lot in Northglenn before being escorted inside.

After hanging out with the boys on the trampolines and hitting baseballs, it was lunchtime. We gather around a couple tables in a place that's part of the center, but sectioned off by a chain link fence. Soon, the place is crawling with girls of all ages grabbing onto the fence. A cacophony of young voices drone through the building, "Kevin!" "Nick!" "Joe!"

"I don't know how they find out," Kevin Sr., the boys' dad said. "There's some kind of secret underground network. This is calm compared to some of our stops."

After lunch, we all loaded up in a couple white vans and drove south to the venue. It was the middle of the afternoon and as we pulled into the amphitheater grounds, the road was packed with screaming fans holding hand-scrawled signs with well-wishes like "I love you Nick!"

Ticket holders who paid extra were able to attend the band sound check. That was good. There were very few who bought that option, but the seats were front and center. The brothers had a chance to meet their public, shake a few hands, and take some selfies with adoring fans. If this ends up being a blog post, I'll link to some of the fan interviews which are fun to watch.

The front act was a brand new singer named Demi Lovato. She wasn't at the Boondocks event although we had a chance to hear her story, too, in her dressing room. It's an interesting one. She said she stood in line at a casting call. One day she was a regular kid, the next day she

was on the Disney cable TV channel, and now on national tour.

I'd covered the performance part of shows before, and this was similar. We were able to record during the first song or two and that was it. We went to our seats in "press row." I can't remember exactly where we were. Afterwards, our group was escorted back to our cars in Northglenn.

The Jonas Brothers broke up after they all grew up, got married and started families. Nick went solo. The brothers reunited as an act last year. Young Roxie, stayed in touch with Kevin Sr. and was invited to their show in Nashville. I live vicariously through my student interns and am very happy for Roxie.

As for access to events, small towns are the best. Photographing small town rodeos is a lot of fun, compared to big international Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) events, like CFD, The Daddy of 'em All.

Events like that, getting media credentials is a little more involved. Over the years, I've gotten to know the members of the Public Relations committee and no longer have to jump through a lot of hoops.

The Lander Pioneer Days rodeo over the July 4th weekend is no exception. Press passes aren't necessary, no forms to sign swearing "I'm not a vegan" and using the rodeo photos to disparage the sport.

Climbing up the fence rails to the top of the chute, to take in the oddly pleasant stench of lean rough stock snorting and awaiting in the chutes, the minty smell of wintergreen spit tobacco juice flying from between a nervous bull rider's front teeth - man against beast - is a thrill to watch. Hooked on an eight second ride.

A couple years ago, one of my across the street neighbors mentioned that he was going to

South Africa to visit one of our mutual friends who lives in the middle of nowhere in the town of Memel south of Johannesburg.

I decided at the last minute to make the trip and scout movie locations for a project I'd been contemplating. Traveling internationally, there aren't all the add-on fees and jacked up ticket prices for spur of the moment travel.

Because of the time zone differences, I ended up a day behind the rest of the party who went there from Boulder. I rented a car from the airport and tried my hand at driving on the wrong side of the street. A guy from Uganda met me to show the way. We had some small talk in Luganda, the common language in Uganda, since I spent three weeks in Kampala a few years ago on a movie project that didn't see the light of day.

The first place we stopped was a small bar in the township of Zamani. Most places in South Africa continue to have social remnants of apartheid. There are township ghettos occupied by blacks adjacent to the towns inhabited mostly by whites.

There are no women in these places. My "go-to" beer on this trip was Carling's Black Label. It was surprisingly as bad as Carling's brewed in the United States.

Turns out, when we arrived in Memel there was another filmmaker from Pretoria there taking footage named Pieter. We were both having a little trouble figuring out a story for our projects, after comparing notes, I'm thinking there is no intrinsic story.

I ended up producing an on-the-spot documentary about the back story, which is the role of tribal spiritual and cultural norms in modern society, and why their familial structure is well suited for intentional community development.

The shortage of safe, clean and affordable housing is a huge problem in South Africa, as it is

in most places, including the United States.

On my way out of the country, I befriended a guy named Isaac. He goes by Shakes. He lives in Soweto, which is the black ghetto attached to Johannesburg. Over the next day and a half, I shot on my iPhone and completed all the interviews I needed while embedded within Soweto.

Shakes found me a place to stay at one of his neighbors. The culture is very communal and family centered, so all the homes are like small apartment complexes with separate living quarters. Everyone shares common spaces and eats common meals made in a central kitchen. I was fed spaghetti and some sort of red sauce with room temperature water and white bread.

The woman of the house was a traditional doctor. In America, she'd be an herbalist, and psychic healer, with a little bit of that old time religion sprinkled on top.

Even though apartheid segregation was overturned, a separate but equal social structure is still in place. Most main towns that are predominantly white in population, have a related black ghetto township attached to it. Soweto is the township adjacent to Johannesburg. Zamani is the township adjacent to Memel.

I'm usually pretty good about picking up the local language since I tend to hang around with local people and frequent local joints in places like Zamani, but I had absolutely no clue about what to speak, since there are multiple languages spoken. That's a throwback to when the Dutch and English took over the place, traditional tribes and clans were randomly split up.

Pieter and a writer who was in our group went on a self-guided safari. Watching the *Animal Planet* and the *National Geographic* channels on cable TV led me to believe that the only places where a tourist can see the wild beasts of Africa are in the fancy game reserves in Kenya.

We pulled up to a gate. Pieter called ahead about our film crew wanting to get a few wildlife shots. Soon a guy who was dressed like a park ranger met us. It was Sunday and this park was

closed, but we were let in anyway.

We drove around the park and saw a herd of zebra stampeding across the road, and wildebeests lounging around a boggy spot. There were bird blinds all over the place to observe lots of birds I hadn't seen before.

There were no elephants or giraffes at this place, but the herd of zebras was a big enough highlight for me. I ended up writing a 30-minute documentary story, *Aging Gratefully: The Power of Cultural Traditions*.

This was a pretty good intentional embedding experience, considering I was able to stay out of jail. The big disappointment was not seeing a hippopotamus. After returning to Colorado, I got my wish and saw two hippos at the Denver Zoo. I guess I could have saved myself a trip!

Tiger or Roger?

Being an all-purpose writer, I tend to put myself into situations that have unclear outcomes, not knowing how things will end up. How people master their skills varies and different learning styles can instill self-doubt or self-confidence.

There's an urban legend, that to really get proficient at something, be it writing, playing music or baseball, a person needs to tirelessly pursue their single goal with total focus.

I think how a person develops their interests can be a big source of self-doubt because of different learning styles.

My friend Jennifer suggested a book to me called *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World* by David Epstein. Epstein classifies people as either being a specialist or a generalist.

The specialist would be like Tiger Woods who was a pretty good golfer right out of the

womb. He stuck with the links and became the best golfer in the world.

On the other hand, Roger Federer was a swimmer, soccer player, baseball player, and oh, yeah, a tennis player. He didn't specialize in tennis until much later in his youth.

Epstein researched the backgrounds of athletes and artists, and determined that generalists are more creative and likely to be late bloomers.

That would be me.

Average guys don't just wake up one morning and say, "I want to play second base for the Yankees." The learning curve between playing ball on a sandlot to being pretty good at organized town baseball is maybe a few summers.

The jump to the next level becomes a multi-year full time job for career minor league vagabonds. Of all the baseball players in the world, only a few get the chance to be major leaguers each spring.

My flash-in-the-pan interests over the years were based on obsessions. As an adult, I became a pretty good violin player, to the point I was able to teach *Suzuki Method* students up through book three. For reference the key song would be the *Gavotte in D Major* by J.S. Bach.

I'd say my specialty was teaching beginners aged 4 to 6. They are called "Pre-Twinklers" who learn the basic techniques on a violin body made out of a small Kleenex box with the neck fastened on, in the form of a ruler.

I wrote a newspaper story about the local violin school. My photographer friend, Tom, who also is an avid garage sale aficionado pounded on my door one Saturday morning, "You should buy this old violin," he said. "I think it was Quentin Roberts's."

We loaded into his orange VW beetle convertible and headed over to check out the violin. I

thought the fiddle was a pretty good deal and paid twenty bucks for it. Besides, there's provenance and a good story, since it was once owned by local fiddler Quentin Roberts.

The paper ran a story about the local violin school I wrote. After contacted the teacher I interviewed, I inquired about lessons. "You know I teach kids," she warned. "When do you want to start?"

I began lessons on the Roberts violin. My mom dug out an old instrument that was once owned by my grandfather. I played that for a while.

The focus just wasn't there. Maybe I was a bit intimidated by 10 year olds being more skilled than me. The basis of the *Suzuki Method* is, everyone has ability and it just needs to be nurtured by love.

One day, something came over me and I became obsessed with the challenge. After self-teaching myself, I eventually caught up with the rest of my student cohort - most of whom were 2 feet shorter than me.

I began taking this all more seriously and invested in a 1955 German-made instrument by Ernst Heinrich Roth.

A local orchestra was forming. I was good enough to play in that, and entertain in a chamber group at one of the local bars after the weekly Lion's Club meeting.

When I moved to Colorado, there were more players, but even the hacks had studied music in college. I didn't have the time or the ambition to kick my skills up to even that amateur level. My violin is on the back desk. I pull it out every now and again and screech through the basic repertoire.

I got pretty good at baseball. I quit piano lessons to focus on the game. I broke my ankle sliding into second base in 1967 and sat out the rest of the season. Missing a year was a big deal

because, meanwhile, other kids matured and were better than me.

Ultimately, it boiled down to me being unable to hit the curveball.

As I progressed up through the youth baseball hierarchy, it was clear I physically wasn't gifted enough to compete. I ended up learning the rules and strategies and was a better coach than player, but not interested enough to continue, even though I had opportunities.

I should have stuck with piano lessons. My chances of playing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" on the Yankee Stadium organ were better than me playing second base. Besides, that job was always taken.

What I was pretty good at is writing and art. Having started when in grade school I caught onto all the art forms presented in the classroom - writing, painting, drawing, pencil sketching.

I was interested in it enough to be the cartoonist for my school papers starting with the *Tumbleweed* in junior high, the *Thunderbolt* in high school and the *Collegian* in college. There wasn't a course of study for that. Most newspapers didn't have a cartoonist on staff since they subscribed to services. Again, there was a steep learning curve to get to the next level.

By the time I enrolled in the liberal arts program at Hastings College, I became more interested in environmental sciences and political science in the early 1970s and went those directions instead.

My courses of study were nonstarters on the surface. There was a point in time when I regretted my college education. I had no real skills. There were no jobs counting smooth and wrinkled peas or any evaluating the merits of various political systems.

As it turned out, after I graduated, it was a good time to reinvent myself since jobs were sparse anyway with the unemployment rate at 8.2 percent, I ended up sitting out the post Watergate and Vietnam War recession in grad school at the University of Wyoming. I took every

class I could that offered some sort of internship, a couple of those opportunities continue to have value today.

There was a high level of bipartisan consensus around environmental issues. During January and February 1969, there was a big oil spill that originated at a Union Oil drilling platform off the Santa Barbara coast. The event brought national attention to the fragility of the environment with images of oil-drenched birds washed up on the beaches.

In 1970 the EPA was formed and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was signed into law by President Nixon.

I had heard about colleges offering environmental politics as a field of study. At the time one of the few programs was at the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay. I was accepted, but they didn't offer any graduate assistantships.

At the last minute, there was a cancellation and I was offered a full teaching assistantship at UW in Laramie. I created my own curriculum. I melded my hard science and soft science majors together. My thesis topic was, "Post-Earth Day Attitudes Among College Students." The first Earth Day was April 22, 1970. I found that while students intellectually favor protecting the environment, they also were unlikely to change their consumptive behaviors.

I mentioned that my main mission was to gain experience. My important internships were with the Wyoming State Legislature where I assisted several legislators. As a result of the experience I gained here, I became a lobbyist on behalf of the communities where I worked and for the Wyoming Association of Municipalities.

The other was the Wyoming Human Services Project (WHSP), which was funded by a U.S. Department of Commerce grant to place multidisciplinary problem solvers into key positions in Gillette.

My colleagues were social workers, parks and recreation managers, lawyers, and artists. The Powder River Basin in northeast Wyoming was undergoing rapid population growth from the newly booming surface coal mining industry and the WHSP team worked part time in an agency and part time working in the community mostly providing services to empower citizens to help themselves.

After two years at UW, I didn't finish because I took the WHSP job, with the Gillette city government as a grant writer. It came very natural to me.

The funding application stories I write for my book and movie making projects today, have similar themes around how multidisciplinary interactions among diverse people, in the context of their cultural and physical environments result in creative solutions.

Since 2006, that theme has resonated in my storytelling, which has matured and these days during COVID-19 more prolific largely because of all the SU&W groups I attend. It's been good digitally hanging out in cyberspace with hundreds of writers from around the world, all supporting one another.

2. Imperfection or Perfection?

“Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft. I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun while they're doing it.” — Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (1994)

I'm an observer of the human condition. Because people are involved, that's imperfect from the get-go. Perfection in writing is largely a product of technology. Can you imagine chiseling stories into a flat piece of stone? Scribbling *Little Women* with a quill dipped in ink? Banging out *On the Road* on hundreds of sheets of paper taped together and scrolled through an old Underwood manual typewriter?

Writing was inaccurate at best, and in my view, still should be. In my lifetime, the obsession with perfection began with Liquid Paper, then IBM Selectric typewriters with back-space erase then word processors that saved templated letter formats and it's been getting worse ever since. I'm not even going to mention copy machines.

Now computers loaded programs like Microsoft Office, and Scrivener, further the misguided standard of perfection, although in my mind, there is a difference between perfection and accuracy.

No matter how perfect, you think your final draft is, be it a book manuscript, screenplay, short story, letter to the editor, work memo, technical report, painting, or whatever, it's likely not final. My experience, it's better to be accurate than perfect.

There will always be a supervisor, or colleague, or editor, who will notice an inconsistency, want additional information, and otherwise want to put their mark on your work. I've learned that those changes usually improve my stories tremendously. I'm open to new ideas.

Maybe it's generational. I'm a product of an imperfect writing world. My background is journalism, which began in 1967 at Carey Junior High School in Cheyenne, Wyoming, my home town. I wrote for *The Tumbleweed* newspaper that came out monthly.

We didn't have formal journalism classes, but Miss Flynn, one of the school paper sponsors, was a stickler for grammar. After school, the newspaper staff would edit stories and layout the

paper typed out on off-set stencil paper. The typewriter keys would cut the words into paper coated with some sort of waxy surface. The ink was resisted, except through the words cut into the stencil.

There were lots of kids on the staff and a hodgepodge of content. I landed a monthly column called “The Poet’s Corner.” I didn’t write the poetry, maybe a limerick or two, but mostly compiled works collected from other kids’ English assignments. I was an editor and guaranteed column-inches, over and above anything else I wrote.

News writing, itself is imperfect. Back when the news cycle ended when the presses rolled, reporters gathered up the best information available shortly before a story had to be completed, organized using the inverted pyramid story structure before handing it over to at least one editor who re-read and fact checked the information.

When information moved slower, savvy news sources would withhold sensitive information until after the deadline to gain more time to get their stories straight before a particular story got out. Withholding information was also a way to “punish” a publication or reporter by sending the scoop to another media source, like the radio or a rival paper.

In my real jobs, I was a spokesman for local governments, and became adept at these strategies. When I became a newspaper writer, I knew how to be equally as manipulative with news sources by holding their stories.

I wasn’t a paid journalist during the typewriter era, but at the beginning of word-processing.

The *Wyoming State Journal* was one of the first papers in the country to go quasi-digital. Because the paper was small, it was the perfect size to prove the concept. In the late 1980s, Apple Computer, Inc. introduced the Macintosh SE machines. They were small, compact, Windows-based, had an internal 20mb memory and a drive slot that could read 1.4mb floppy

discs.

The computers were networked together and stories dumped into the editor's folder, or delivered on floppy disc. The stories were edited, formatted on a rudimentary version of Word before sent to the composition shop at the back of the office next to the pressroom.

After stories were printed, they were cut out with scissors, run through a waxer and laid out on gridded sheets. The editor proofread the grids. Invariably there would be typos or new information that needed to be added.

Typos were carefully trimmed out using an x-acto knife and the small piece of paper with the correct spelling was inserted into the copy on the knife blade point. If there were lengthy changes, they would have to be made to be the same word count, so as to not mess up the layout.

The *New York Times* slogan is, "All the news that's fit to print." Our's was "All the news that fits, we print."

After the layout approval, they were photographed onto metal plates, fastened to the platen and the web presses rolled. At the end of the day, I liked to go into the pressroom and listen to the web press whir and take in the smell of fresh oil-based ink on the page. You guessed right, it wasn't near as addictive as the smell of the light blue mimeographed words on handouts passed out in elementary school.

When I had a lead story, it was very self-satisfying to grab a copy and read it before the ink was dry. I was out of the business shortly thereafter and before the process was fully digitized. Now with newspaper consolidation, it is possible to reprint an exact duplicate of a paper but with different fonts and masthead. I've seen identical sports pages in both the Boulder and Longmont papers - but at least, they are printed on paper.

If there was competition, it was between the morning newspaper - where I grew up, that was

the morning *Wyoming Eagle*, and the *Wyoming State Tribune* that came out in the afternoon. The two eventually merged. There was some competition for news with the radio and TV stations.

The competition wasn't as apparent as it is now. The moment-to-moment news cycle is a renaissance of imperfect writing, but for all the wrong reasons.

There's a difference between perfection and accuracy. News now is based on rumor, second hand information, and pure speculation. It's more important to get the story out there, than verifying story facts.

Once an inaccuracy is found on the printed page, you'd think it was the end of the earth. Retractions would be printed the next day, "The *Wyoming State Journal* regrets the error."

Now in the digital media age, new information magically appears, wrong information disappears and is replaced with different. There's no accountability, "*Intergalactic News* has not independently verified the story, but, we'll tell you what might be correct information anyway because it was reported on the *Gotham Times* webpage, which isn't wrong very often."

The reason that the public has waning faith in the news media is because accuracy isn't required and vagaries are packaged up to be believable.

Op-ed perspective, and speculative statements opined by "experts" or celebrities about the news is the low-hanging fruit and what I consider "fake news." That term has been co-opted by politicians to characterize any information that's critical of this or that.

"The coronavirus deaths MIGHT triple ..." or "Hurricane Elvis COULD BE devastating." There's no basis to these stories other than a sensationalized claim.

That's different from "false news" which are stories based on made-up facts - aka, lies.

I'm also of the era of typewriters. After I graduated from high school, the most useful class I took was a summer school typing course taught by Mr. Halverson. It was at the insistence of my

mother. “If you can type, you can get a job doing anything, anywhere.”

My big graduation present was a Smith-Corona portable electric typewriter. Turns out, she was right. Even when I had real jobs, knowing how to type was a big help.

She also said that I should learn how to dance the waltz. That was sort of useful, but not as useful as typing, considering I haven’t been dancing in years.

As an undergrad at Hastings College in central Nebraska, I had two majors, environmental science, and political systems analysis. The latter involved writing papers, lots of papers.

The college style manual was Kate Turabian. I always liked to type footnotes, and the odd Latin word abbreviations like *ibid.* (as before) and *et al.* (short for *et alia* - “and others”) I don’t think I’ve typed a footnote since grad school.

At one time, I could type, “Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the country,” 100 words per minute, and willing to learn other phrases. My content was generally pretty good, but my grade was always counted down because of typos.

The lesson? Typing slows down my writing. I regret taking my Smith Corona electric to the thrift store during a move 15 years ago.

That was my last typewriter until an analog friend of mine, Ken, gave me a portable Brothers typewriter. It weighs a ton, but doesn’t take up much space.

Ken and I met at a Boulder International Film Festival schmoozer. At that time, he was making movies, but we mostly connected because he also was a newspaper photographer, but in a big market at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He still shoots on film. I gave him my two workhorse Olympus cameras.

I can never be satisfied with one thing, I have to make a collection. Ken’s the same way. He had a dozen or so typewriters and at a moving sale he had, I acquired nine more from him.

Some didn't work and there's a typewriter repairman in Longmont, just up the road from me who cleaned and fixed them.

Since I started writing again, I generally type up to three drafts on a manual typewriter. My workhorse is a heavy Olympia desktop.

Before COVID-19 self-isolation, I used one of three portables at my face-to-face writing groups. Typing forces me to be more thoughtful and deliberate about my words, mostly because being too cavalier with my fingers means more editing and more drafts.

There's a documentary movie called *California Typewriter* (2016) about a store in San Francisco that buys, sells, trades, and repairs manual typewriters. The movie profiled hobby typists, including Tom Hanks, and writers like two-time Pulitzer Prize winner David McCullough who still types his drafts on a typewriter. I think that movie spurred interest in typewriters.

"Beyond Heart Mountain" is the title of a *Wyoming State Journal* newspaper column I wrote sometime in the mid-1980s. The paper was published in the afternoon and on the newsstands a couple times a week.

Writing local news and stories about everyday people fit in well with my continuing curiosity about relatable life experiences. I never had the desire to write about big city experiences - hard news.

Lot's of upwardly mobile writers passed through the staff. I liked local news and covered any hard news, with local angles - interviewing a local person who attended the Democratic National Convention as a delegate, or someone who made the long drive to Cheyenne to see President Ronald Reagan give a speech.

The Lander vs. Riverton football game was a big sports rivalry that I wrote as if the two

teams were the Packers and the Bears. My literary goal was to be waiting in the grocery store line and a random person says to me, “I really related to that column you wrote last week and it’s stuck on my refrigerator door.”

“Beyond Heart Mountain” was one of those stories. This is excerpted from the column and updated, based on information from the genealogical website ancestry.com.

I met Bryan and Miyo Honkawa at Stapleton International Airport in Denver. We flew back to Riverton strapped into each other on a puddle jumper flight. They were heading from California to Worland for a family funeral.

In 1942, Miyo was 17 when she and her family were sent to the Heart Mountain Relocation camp from the Santa Anita detention center in California. “I was there for only a couple months,” she said.

“My girlfriend and I got jobs in Chicago. We did house cleaning.” The ticket out of camp was to have a parole sponsor and a reason to move, “My parents lived at Heart Mountain until the end of the war in 1945.”

While writing this book, I tried to contact her, since I now had many questions to ask since my cultural rebirth, but she died a few years ago.

Shortly after that column ran, one of the other reporters and I made a trek to Park County in northeast Wyoming to see the Heart Mountain Relocation camp between Powell and Cody.

It was one of 10 centers around the interior of the United States where Japanese Americans mostly from the West Coast were sent during World War II. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan, there was fear that local Japanese could be in cahoots with the Empire of Japan and pose threats to national security.

That chapter in Wyoming history wasn’t covered in my 4th or 7th grade history classes. I don’t

ever remember learning from Mrs. Knudsen about the 10,000 to 14,000 Japanese who lived the duration of the War at Heart Mountain. I don't think Mr. Cope taught anything about the all-Japanese 442nd Regimental Combat Team that fought against the Nazis and Fascists in Italy during World War II.

It wasn't until I was an adult that I learned much about the camps, and in particular Heart Mountain.

Like Jack Kerouac, my writing reflects personal experiences at places and important as well as everyday events. Kerouac had the idea for *On the Road* that was published in 1951 well before then. The book is based on notebook journals about a couple cross-country road trips he made, one by himself and another with Neal Cassady and a couple others.

One adventure on my list of things to do is to recreate *On the Road* as the "Digital Scroll" project. Right now, it hasn't progressed past being a facebook page. The idea is to retell the stories of his trans-America travels in the context of the current time, and in the forms of digital movies, photo slideshows, music, podcasts, or other multimedia interpretations.

The only segment I've completed is a night he spent in Cheyenne, Wyoming. The next installment is the leg through Nebraska to Cheyenne, and from Cheyenne to Longmont, Colorado.

The well known story is that Kerouac wrote *On the Road* in three weeks. He taped together 120 feet of onion skin paper so he wouldn't have to stop and scroll single sheets into the typewriter.

Immersion and Hemingway

Having come out of a journalism background, I'm always thrown back to Ernest Hemingway. I wasn't much of a fiction reader, so not that familiar with his books, except as

general common knowledge. During self-isolation, I have watched a few movies based on his books, and a Woody Allen movie called *Midnight in Paris* (2011). That's a fun time-travel story about a screenwriter (Owen Wilson) penning his first novel and transported back to the 1920s where he befriends the likes of Hemingway and Gertrude Stein who beta reads his book.

I am more interested in his life, and journalistic writings about his ordinary and extraordinary experiences that included during both world wars.

I wasn't attracted to his larger than life flamboyance as much as I am to his presence in my home state of Wyoming and in particular Cheyenne. Hemingway spent quite a bit of time in Wyoming beginning in 1928 when he wrote *The Sun Also Rises* at the Folly Ranch near Sheridan.

Fast forward to November 1940. He divorced his third wife Pauline Pfeiffer, and soon thereafter was married his fourth, Martha Gellhorn by a justice of the peace in Cheyenne. The wedding reception was held at the Union Pacific depot in Cheyenne, which is dramatized in *Hemingway and Gellhorn* by HBO (2012).

I err on the side of imperfection and hand-in-hand with that is getting better at whatever I'm doing, and learning more about whatever I'm doing. How that translates, rather than striving for perfection, it means compounding the breadth of imperfection.

My assumption is, writing a book or producing a movie project is close enough to being done when the full story arc is complete, 85 percent polished and 15 percent TBD. That's leeway for changes by other editors.

When I decided to be a starving artist, my path started with writing in three-act structure for small and large screens. I didn't know much about the movie business, itself, except what I was learning at the public access TV station. Compared to what I knew before I started, I realized

there's much more to learn.

I've heard from school teacher friends of mine, there are various iterations of three basic learning styles - auditory, visual, and kinetic. I think their definitions are self-explanatory. I learn by all three means, but rely more on the kinetic-experiential-Hemingway style.

In that vein, a feature movie written and directed by Susannah Grant, who is best known for being the *Erin Brockovich* (2000) screenwriter, would be shooting some establishing scenes in Boulder during the summer of 2006.

The principal photography was shot in Canada the year before. The *Catch and Release* casting company was looking for background actors.

Some friends from Denver drove to Boulder and signed up to be extras. "They need more men," I was told. "Go over to the library." It was the last afternoon for registration and the line wasn't long at all.

They took some basic information from me, including any acting experience. In college, I played the King in a children's play, *Dick Whittington and His Cat*, and Dr. Carrasco in a Lander community dinner theater production of *Man of La Mancha*. That was about it.

I had forgotten about it, but remember receiving a call as I walked out of the Body Shop on the Pearl Street Mall. I took the call outside. The overwhelming scents of soap, moisturizers, and other beauty products were giving me a headache.

It was the casting company asking if I'd like to be "Passerby 157." I accepted and couldn't wait to be around the production. "Remember to bring a few changes of clothes," the voice on the other end of the phone said. "Solids - no dots, no stripes, no logos. We'll be staging at the library."

I don't remember the exact day, but the call time was early in the morning for a couple days

during the middle of August. The days ran long, with plenty of time hurrying up and waiting.

The movie stars were Jennifer Garner and Timothy Olyphant with a supporting cast that included Kevin Smith and Juliette Lewis. You can look up what the movie is about, but it was generally panned by critics and lost millions at the box office.

Jennifer Garner was pregnant at the time and in all her scenes, she's holding a bag on her lap. She was very personable and approachable while we were waiting around. When I'm around celebs, I generally don't approach them. I don't know what I'd say since there would be no context, "Oh Jennifer, I love you in those Capital One ads. I got a credit card because I'm such a big fan."

I would have been more interested talking to her husband at the time, Ben Affleck, who was hanging around the set. He and Matt Damon had a HBO reality series, *Project Greenlight* (2001 - 2005) that featured a random movie maker hired to produce one of their screenplays. I was thinking about entering, but didn't get around to it, which is another regret of my creative life.

The Pearl Street Mall was still open for business, but the set cordoned off. During time lags, Jennifer greeted her adoring public who gathered behind the yellow tape to get a glimpse of the action.

Groups of actors were assigned to an assistant director, who was in charge of placing extras around the location. In my case, that was the Pearl Street Mall. Others, including lycra-clad bicyclists, were sent to University Hill and hung around the Sink pizza place. That Boulder icon made it into the movie.

The main things I learned were the commands, "Back to One!" and how labor-intensive studio productions are. There are so many jobs that aren't mentioned by high school counselors. Who knew there was a job putting tape over sun reflections on a concrete walkway post? Wires

everywhere and crewmembers keeping everything from getting tangled up.

That experience, as brief as it was, gave me a lot of confidence, plus I was fed some pretty good snacks and paid a little bit of non-union scale money to learn.

My first short screenplay, *Stardust* (2005) won third place in the Denver Screenwriting Center contest. I decided to produce it, which was a bit disastrous because I didn't know what I was doing.

After hanging out on the *Catch and Release* set, I was more confident finishing the next short project *A Little Bit of Discipline* (2006), based on the life of a Japanese man recounting a summer following his release from the Heart Mountain relocation camp. That ended up adding context to my emotional attachment to *Beyond Heart Mountain*.

I was on a roll now having a little bit of experience to go along with the equipment and crew available in conjunction with the public access TV station.

People wonder about my creative path. I didn't go to film school or major in creative writing or journalism. I'm self taught. Had I known this before, I probably would've been more deliberate about being trained better and likely would have learned more sooner than later. But that didn't happen in my haphazard case.

Catch and Release wasn't the first time I'd experienced unique movie and TV events and activities first hand that later would add to my general knowledge.

While I was living in Gillette in northeast Wyoming on April 28, 1979, George Willig, the guy who got in trouble for climbing up the World Trade Center tower 2 in Downtown New York City, had become a technical climbing celebrity. He fashioned ascenders that fit into the channels that went up the side of the building used by the window washers.

A couple years later, he and Steve Matous made an ascent of Devil's Tower in northeast

Wyoming that aired live on *ABC Wide World of Sports*, you know, “The Thrill of Victory and the Agony of Defeat.”

Three years before, Devil’s Tower was on the minds of the movie-going public. The culminating scenes from the sci-fi classic, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1976) starring Richard Dreyfuss and Teri Garr put Devil’s Tower on the pop culture map. The alien mother ship lands in peace and releases a bunch of people who were mysteriously abducted over the years, including pilots who went missing over the Bermuda Triangle.

“Let’s go up and meet them on top,” my friend and climbing buddy Charlie suggested. The same day as Willig and Mateus climbed, two groups of my friends went up a route called Hollywood and Vine located on the south side of the 1,283 foot high volcanic stone anomaly.

Back then it was an aid route and now a free climb rated 5.10, which means climbing with no rope as seen in the Oscar winning documentary, *Free Solo* (2018) that features Arnold Honnold free climbing El Capitan in Yosemite National Park in 2017.

Willig and Matous went up a route called Tulgey Wood rated 5.10 on the west side that faced the parking lot. We arrived early around 5:30am to make our approach, and awestruck by all the production trucks and crew around.

The best climbers were on the production crew with 10 climbers stringing cables and cords totaling 30,000-feet through the parking lot and to the top of the tower. ABC originally requested to stage the equipment and crew on top using a helicopter. That request was denied.

My party made it to the top in time to greet Willig and Mateos. There were 2,000 onlookers down below. Because it was an aid route and weight wasn’t as big a factor, we hauled up a six pack of Coors beer and offered one to George and his crew, which they politely refused. I’m

hoping we also refrained since the rappel down is always a little tricky.

Just being around a production of this size for the first time was remarkable. Little did I know at the time that my life would circle back to big remote productions, and how little effort it takes to be immersed in them - intentionally or not.

My creative path was evolutionary and still changing. One of my friends chose a difficult route. He quit a steady job to attend film school, get some knowledge, experience, and make some contacts.

He's back working a regular job. If you're 20, debt free, no kids, and own nothing but what you can pile into the back of your Subaru, you may have a chance to scratch through and find work seeking your fortune in the big markets in LA or New York City where everything is important.

In 2011, I was visiting a college classmate in Nebraska. On the return trip, there's a weird tourist attraction near Alliance called "carhenge." It's a replica of the Stonehenge in England, but constructed out of old car bodies painted gray.

There was a young guy there just out of college who was driving out from Pennsylvania to seek his fortune in Hollywood.

"I have a job waiting for me in California," he said as we exchanged contact information in the parking lot. From what I recall, the job he thought he had lined up fell through and he ended up sofa surfing. In a place like LA, there are production jobs and opportunities. He landed on his feet as an actor, screenwriter and producer.

Back in 2007, I recall watching a segment on *CBS Sunday Morning* about a mild mannered bunch of artists in New York City called the Painter's Group that's been meeting for going on for six decades.

The group decided to all paint their interpretations of the same person. The subject selected was former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor who lived in the neighborhood. The works from her sitting ended up being an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. and featured in a documentary.

It's tough to put your fingers to the keyboard, keep your nose to the grindstone, ear to the ground, and try and make money from that position. Making it as a creative type is hard work. It eventually takes business planning when luck starts running out.

Flounder or Finish?

"I've been a puppet, a pauper, a pirate, a poet, a pawn and a king

I've been up and down and over and out and I know one thing

Each time I find myself layin' flat on my face

I just pick myself up and get back in the race ...” - *That's Life* (1966) refrain sung by Frank Sinatra

The reason 90 percent of manuscripts don't get published is because they sit half-done in a file cabinet or buried in the bowels of an external hard drive uncompleted.

Maybe the hard copy was tossed into a forgotten box in the spare room. I know this to be true, because during my COVID-19 whirlwind purge, I came across the manuscript for *Wyoming Graffiti*, the work that I've had in progress since 1987.

The point of writing, or any art form for that matter, is to finish. Experiencing self-doubt and writing to perfection almost guarantee incomplete projects, or ones that take really a long time to be finished.

Life is imperfect and writing about it should be imperfect, too. For me writing is always about telling the good, the bad, and the ugly of my true story sometimes cloaked in fictional alter

egos, but nonetheless speaking my voice from my guts. Those imperfect stories flow easily. But then there are the evil computers that make striving for unattainable perfection too easy.

This book is about me waiting for my ship to come in. I've sailed on many, and keep getting on whatever ship comes into port not knowing if it's THE ship.

Somehow, I came ashore as an accidental author. Unpredictable seas tossed around by the large waves of self-doubt and confidence, imperfection and perfection, with some smooth sailing on calmer waters.

The go-to karaoke song that I sing after a couple beers is *That's Life* by Frank Sinatra. Facing the ups and downs and over and outs is my life's anthem.

"Don't start something you can't finish," my mother told me. I think she got tired picking up after my half-made projects. She was a watercolorist and a prolific one at that. Her specialty was aspen trees - aspen trees in the summer, aspen trees in the winter. The aspen trees in the fall were the most popular because of the leaf colors.

What she didn't finish, she cut up into strips and made them into book marks or facing for greeting cards. She knew how to make products at various price points. Ten book marks for \$5 each made from scraps, was equal to selling one larger painting.

She ran a volume business. Mom was the front act, Dad cut the mats, built the frames and hung the shows and either sat in the back of the room with the one or two other guys in attendance supporting their wives, or went home. He was an introvert like me.

When I worked real jobs, I did a lot of writing - memos, parking meter plans, snow removal policies, and the like, but all that didn't seem like writing, though.

Writing my own memos, gathering up policy analyses and reports composed by others, and compiling it all into packets for Friday afternoon distribution to the city council was work, and

finishing the work was the point of it all.

My main day-to-day writing genre was researching and compiling grant applications to raise money around an organization's story, and still is, but now I write grants, to fund my own stories. When it comes to writing grants, I'm a finisher who meets hard deadlines.

Writers of any genre whether it's business writing, technical writing, academic writing, or creative writing each have their unique styles and associated workflows.

Workplace supervisors, magazine and book publishers all have different ways for you to present your materials and each have their personal quirks about what they like and don't like.

This is important, and why rejections or substantial rewrites shouldn't be viewed as discouraging words, but are just part of any writing process.

If you get rejected, move on - it's a numbers game based on the proclivities of readers who may or may not like your ideas. If you are asked to rewrite, rewrite. At some point when you sign on the line that is dotted, you lose control of your project, anyway.

Never ending routines

If you're working for yourself or for someone else, the routines are pretty much the same, but the intentions are different.

My observation, casual or part time writers, don't self-identify as writers. They are a fireman, or a cowboy, or a nurse, or a ballerina, whatever they grew up to be.

"Oh, I've been working on this anthology of my newspaper columns off and on for the past 30 years," was my refrain when asked at a party what's the latest in my creative life.

Not exactly a very inspiring "hook" for anyone listening, as they head back over to the snack table for more hummus and zucchini.

"Floundering" holds true for aspiring filmmakers, my main art form, and I'm pretty sure it

holds true for other creative types who are visual artists or live performers. In Boulder, you can't swing your yoga mat around without whacking into someone who calls themselves a screenwriter.

If aspiring creative types rewind the tapes in their heads about their past and present work lives. I'm pretty sure they would think about the never ending routines that drove them nuts: working alone in front of a computer; looming deadlines; bottomless cups of yesterday's coffee; but put up with the boredom because of the paycheck at the end of the week.

Don't get me wrong, I don't give away my creativity for free anymore and like to make a few bucks to pay the internet bill and have a place to work other than at a table in my house with the cat walking across the computer keyboard trying to help.

On top of that, working for myself, I find the boss to be really nice and he understands my quirky work habits. I'm more than happy to meet or exceed the requirements of my self-directed workplace schedule.

I still have a never-ending routine. For example seven days a week starting anywhere from 6am to 9am Mountain Time, I write with 10 to 20 SU&W group members, take a break, then repeat during the afternoon. I don't do much writing at night.

Louisa Mae Alcott thought about her stories and would compose pages and pages of prose in her head. When she arose, her story flowed out of her quill pen and onto the page.

Like Alcott, waking up in the morning with my head full of ideas and edits, I can't wait to get the day going. I may not work for anyone else, but as a creative entrepreneur, my work life is strangely like my old work life, but better.

Working alone in front of the computer - In my past office settings, I was alone in an office, with a few coworkers around who I interacted with maybe once a week for a staff

meeting. Now, I'm still alone in front of a computer screen, but energetically connected to 10 to 20 other writers typing away in the privacies of their own laptops for an hour or two. We are accountable to one another at least once a day.

Looming deadlines - I write grants and beg people for contributions to raise a little money to back my work. I still push hard deadlines, which includes completing a full creative story arc to submit on or before the submission deadline. I've observed that many of the writers in my groups have soft deadlines. I don't have much experience with soft deadlines so I crowd sourced for perspectives. Self-satisfaction and love of writing help move stories forward. Some of my colleagues set quantity measures - like word or page counts. Another motivator is writing in groups, like Shut Up and Write. One of the agreed upon expectations is voicing intentions for the session, then afterward, accounting to the group about their progress, with validation from others.

Choking down bad coffee - I don't miss the nondescript odor of grocery store brand coffee drip-brewed in the break room Mr. Coffee, circa 1985. My hazelnut blend emits a better motivating aroma. I still use the same mug over and over, so that hasn't changed. When I renew my NPR membership, I'll get a different cup as a premium instead of a T-Shirt.

The main difference between the day-to-day grind of a job is the payoff. Instead of doing the work of others, I get compensated by raising a few bucks to keep the doors open, but more importantly the personal satisfaction of moving closer to finishing my creative story projects, and still fitting in everyday life, which is very truncated these days.

As you're scrambling to get out of your old routine and making up a different one, there are a couple actions to get you on the path to being a finisher that I think should be followed by any writer or artist who wants to make coherent conversation about their stories, and/or get their

work out there, whether published, exhibited or performed.

Inside-out tactical writing

The truth as I know, everything is about storytelling, your chosen art form doesn't matter, but is the story behind your book, or screenplay, or the theme of your art show written in your head and on your heart?

Writing from the inside-out isn't a new concept. I certainly didn't come up with the idea. Many writers much more knowledgeable about the craft than me have written in the "how to" books about writing inside out. My version is, complete your story by starting out small and expanding it out while maintaining the arc - completing each draft starting with your one true sentence, as Hemingway calls it, and writing it from beginning to end.

I wake up every morning a different person. I'm always a day older. Before I know it a week has passed, then another month and a year. I knew I was getting old, I didn't think it would happen this fast and my stories are constantly changing.

That's why it's important to keep writing your true stories, no matter if you keep track of your little darlings scribbled on scraps of paper, on note cards, handwritten or typed out drafts, keyed into the Scrivener database, in one long Word document, or in layers.

It doesn't matter what genre or the delivery media, the first draft that you finish should be the story premise. If you get stuck midstream, try paddling upstream and retrace where you've been.

Chances are, when you woke up this morning your story was different. That happens to me, somewhere along the way something happens and pushes me off track from moving forward in the right direction.

Writing inside-out starts with me becoming very familiar with my story starting with the story essence, that I expand into an outline, and then a synopsis. Getting through these three

steps are the only tactics I'll explain in this book. How you complete your work should be based on your creative style and personal preferences.

I usually present workshops about writing inside-out to people, other than artists or writers, mostly housing developers. The sessions include writing a project premise that expands to an outline, then a synopsis, and how these three steps can be developed into a planning strategy or business plan and how to get messages to prospective homebuyers.

Who wants a complete version of their project? I'm pretty sure everyone.

"Oh, I think I'm just going to leave this coconut cream pie out on the countertop because I have baking block and can't move forward," I doubt anyone has said that, because recipes are very prescriptive with the ingredients and baking steps listed. Besides, anyone who has made a cream pie knows that if you dink around too long the filling sets up into a gelatinous glob on the saucepan.

Pudding anyone?

One time I was making sushi rice. The recipe called for 1/4 teaspoon of salt. I added 1/4 cup of salt.

Whoops!

About the only recipe that calls for a 1/4 of salt is DIY Playdoh. At that point, it was pretty easy to make another kettle of rice and restart the recipe. Had I waited until my *inari* sushi (rice packed into deep fried pouches made from tofu) was done but untasted, and my guests pounding on the door, there wouldn't have been enough time to correct my screw up and make a new batch, in favor of a quick trip to the grocery store for a few plastic boxes of day-old California rolls, easily more dried out than yesterday's bagels.

Writing is much the same as my tray of sushi. I think writing your first long forms like a

novel or screenplay, or painting a body of work for a big show seems daunting because as a whole, projects are larger than originally imagined. Breaking down your recipe into smaller chunks cuts back your stress level.

As an example, the original version of *Beyond Heart Mountain* was a completed newspaper column in my manuscript that lay dormant for over 30 years, that was made into a picture book that was expanded into an 80,000-word memoir, and now in production for a companion documentary.

Regardless of your genre, or how you choose to get your work in front of the eyes of an agent, publisher, producer, gallery curator, or your next door neighbor, start with a story premise.

A premise goes by any number of other terms depending on your art form, like tag lines or log lines, there may be subtleties to intellectual writing tacticians, but they are generally the same. Academic writers condense their articles down to an abstract. Grant writers usually submit a short Project Summary, painters write artist statements.

It's your elevator speech. You know, shortening your story into one sentence that you can recite to someone in the length of time it takes for you both to get on the elevator and depart at the next floor. Plus, you'll also need something to talk about at your next cocktail party.

Lack of confidence stopped me from adapting my basic storytelling directions about how to write a premise. My usual audience consists of land developers wanting to get people to join their housing communities. I lacked street cred among my creative peers.

"I'm a writer, I know story structure, I can do this, I don't need no stinking help from some other writer," is what I think goes through the minds of others, which is why I had self doubt about it.

Then I observed hundreds of writers such as myself in all these COVID-19 self isolated writing groups rowing upstream with their projects, much like the housing developers I teach how to tell their stories better.

Condensing hundreds of pages, thousands of words, and a story arc down to a true sentence is more challenging than you think.

Your true sentence

Hemingway says to write “one true sentence.” To get started, I’m talking, literally, about writing one sentence. As an example, I’ll deconstruct the first sentence of the pitch I gave for *Beyond Heart Mountain* when it was picked up for publication.

“What if a Japanese American Baby Boomer learns from his personal experiences and wants to reclaim his heritage after once being part of a culturally thriving community that vanished following World War II because of racial injustice out in the middle of nowhere in his hometown of Cheyenne, Wyoming?” That’s 47 words or 298 characters with spaces.

The basic truth about storytelling, stories are finite. There’s a beginning, middle, and end. That’s it, and within that structure, a true story sentence includes, a protagonist/s/ (the who) , their goal (the what), and their challenge (the why).

The Who - There’s no need to name the protagonist: Names have no intrinsic information and are useless words. Instead, tell us something about the story.

- *A Japanese American Baby Boomer learns from his personal experiences ...*

The What - Clearly present the main goal: This is what drives your story.

- *A Japanese American Baby Boomer learns from his personal experiences and wants to reclaim his heritage*

The Why - Describe the Challenge as a “What if” statement: Add the challenges faced in

attaining the goal.

- *What if a Japanese American Baby Boomer learns from his personal experiences and reclaims his heritage after once being part of a culturally thriving community that vanished following World War II because of racial injustice out in the middle of nowhere in his hometown of Cheyenne, Wyoming?*

The end.

I'll probably rewrite it again, since it's a little jargony. In one true sentence, create a desire among your readers or audience members to visualize your truth in a complete story arc, as well as what happens in between.

It sounds contrived and rehearsed, which it is. Like when you learn conversational Spanish while laid over at the airport before heading out to the beaches of Mazatlan. Not only do you need to know the phrases, you also need to know the context when to say them, and how to respond back.

It's the same with your story premise. Practice, so it becomes a part of your language set. Get it in your head ready to spit it out when there's a lull in the conversation, or there's a good segue when different party goes circulate around to you. Maybe you're waiting in line to get into the grocery store and a masked up person standing six feet behind you starts a conversation.

Stories are never perfect. I know this to be true because I wake up a different person everyday. That means I have to keep testing out all my story premises as my life changes. Every word counts and getting the delivery right takes constant word fiddling - fiddle and test, fiddle and test, and then fiddle some more. You should feel like Itzhak Perlman practicing both parts of the *Double Violin Concerto in D Minor* by J.S. Bach.

Writing from the inside-out, the premise that spans the story arc can be expanded into an

outline. For writers, that can be in a few sections marked by phrases or short sentences - beginning, middle, end. In the context of writing, this is where main characters, and important settings can be added. For artists, that could be about your creative evolution from when your school newspaper voted you as the most artistic boy in the 8th grade.

Once you have the basic story structure outlined, then start filling in a few story details that arc from beginning to the middle to the end. This is called a variety of things, too - synopsis, or treatment or artist statement - depending on what class you took or book you read or podcast you heard. Maybe add major turning points, important backstory and motivations. I think it's a good idea to keep your synopsis to one page.

Each draft that expands from the synopsis evolves from beginning to end and, therefore, always finished. Even when I walk away from a project, and come back to it, I return to a fresh beginning based on a previous and completed version of the story.

I also clean the house before I leave on a trip so when I return home I'm not faced with having to take out the trash, vacuum the carpet, or finish other incomplete tasks left undone when I took off. Unpacking is hassle enough.

Not that I'm any kind of psychologist, but the optimistic feeling I get after finishing a draft is stress-relieving. I no longer need to come up with excuses as to why it's not done.

Experiencing a sense of accomplishment isn't true for everyone. I watched a TV doctor who said there may be underlying cognitive issues that can hamper decision making abilities that are also reasons why finishing a project is difficult for some people.

Why do I think completing a short draft form is the most important part? From an efficiency standpoint, when I ask someone to read an early draft, it's simple for them to go over a completed premise, outline or synopsis and give me immediate feedback about the basic story

arc. I've handed off the first draft of this book to readers, I doubt if many of them will get around to reading it, even with some prodding, but I read enough of it in a couple writing groups convened by my friend Rebecca, that I have a pretty good idea the story is on the right track.

Writing inside-out, even if you get stuck on your synopsis, the outline is complete. If you find plot holes, or inconsistent character motivations, events that are out of order, they are more easily corrected sooner in a shorter version than later when the story is more filled out.

Based on my behavior, and I think it is typical, when someone sends me a 120-page screenplay, chances are I won't get around to reading it. Hand me an outline or synopsis? Yes, I will read those and if they capture my attention, I'll encourage them to send me the finished work.

In a past life I was a screenplay judge for a couple film festivals. I befriended one writer who still sends me his stuff to read. He writes a pretty good story premise to entice me into opening up the email attachment.

The strategic schmooze

Like many of you I attend a variety of art openings, film festival after parties, holiday celebrations at work, neighborhood barbecues, and these days, general masked-up and socially-distanced schmoozers. If you don't you should start. It takes courage to get yourself out there, particularly if it's outside your comfort zone.

It doesn't matter if you create your art for fun or for profit, maybe both, but the truth as I know it, there are three keys to getting your stuff seen - relationships, relationships, relationships.

You won't get your story in front of anyone if you don't hang around with other creative people. Not that I'm any kind of cosmic guy, but I think there's something to be said about collective creative energy when hanging around people with similar mindsets. It'll at least lead to

a bit of optimism and eliminate some self-doubt.

“Yeah, but I want to work through an agent,” might be one excuse to stay cozied on your couch watching reruns of *Law and Order SVU* to avoid meeting creative people. My view, if you’re reluctant to hang with other writers, for example, you’re a writer in name only - a WINO.

If you don’t want to go alone, maybe you feel self-doubt, or you’re like me and don’t like crowds, I’ll go with you. If you need optimistic encouragement, zoom me and I’ll get you jazzed up. Exposing your one true sentence in the form of your story premise to strangers or even to people you know takes courage.

Get involved with the creative industries. If you’re not already involved with the arts, become a member of the local art museum, get on the mailing list for the library cultural program, support your kids in their creative endeavors, befriend other artists and writers.

I know a guy who wrote and self-published a couple children’s books. I don’t have kids, but thought his content met the needs of a unique market of moms and dads. I asked if he considers himself a writer, which he does, but doesn’t associate with other writers.

He’s an MMO (Massive Multiplayer Online) gamer. When there’s no support system, it turns the creative process, not to mention self-distribution, into an even lonelier pursuit than it already is. The last I heard, he lost his optimism, while selling a few books on Amazon.

Even though I’m an introvert and don’t particularly like the cocktail hour scene, my superpower is, I turn into a schmoozer chameleon. My friend Rebecca calls it “extroversion on demand.”

“You’re no introvert,” my friends try to convince me.

“But I don’t wanna be an extrovert,” and when I hear that, I don’t know why, but it puts self-doubt in my head.

I've retaken the Myers - Briggs test a few times and keep coming up as INFP, which is always a big relief. Renowned introvertologist Susan Cain calls people who swing both ways "ambiverts."

Depending on the crowd, while I don't like idle chit chat, I fluently engage in small talk on relevant topics. When I worked in public service, there was lots of gossip about this two-faced politician or that loud-mouthed citizen or whining about this street project or that water line disaster.

When I worked for the domestic violence prevention agency, the crowds were mostly progressive women, and the few men there were prosecutors or cops, and me. I didn't contribute much to the conversations even at a high level, but the snacks were always pretty good. Being around gender-based violence shoptalk is why most of my art has a social justice component to it. Everyone, particularly men, should work for a feminist organization at some point in their careers. Besides, you might get a chance to attend a baby shower and get to flip through the "it's a baby" card section at the grocery store.

These days I hang around with artists of all varieties.

"What's your latest cool thing?" My ears are open for potential clients, and people with interesting stories and ideas.

"I'm writing a book and having trouble with my ..."

I'll be lost at "trouble." I could care less that you're having trouble with your protagonist, or about your trouble with the slow picture framer, or your trouble with the screenplay ending. Troubles have their time and place, but not when you want to get others to recognize your work.

"What's your book about? I'll respond trying to change the conversation.

"... and then there's this plot hole that's giving me trouble."

When you think through your story premise, you can avoid the “trouble” conversations. At a minimum, if you’re familiar with your story - be it a book, or movie, or your art show theme - I can guarantee your conversations will center around why you’re writing the story, or the kind of art you paint, or what inspired you to write your movie.

I suppose you could have on your person, a manuscript or screenplay or your sketchbook, just in case you get a chance to show it off to someone, but packing your premise in your head along with a business card in hand, a link to a movie trailer, or art portfolio on your phone ready to be texted is a lot more convenient.

Art is an impulse business. Close on the spot. If you’re unprepared, “I’ll get back with you next week,” likely won’t happen.

The point is, if you do have aspirations to write the Great American novel or the next blockbuster screenplay, or hang a show at the National Gallery, have your work at some state of completion, so you can refer to your project at whatever state of finish - to break the ice at any party, or while waiting for the elevator, or sitting at the garage while your tires are being rotated.

“What’s your latest cool project?” The guy standing next to you at the *hors d'oeuvres* table may be your first book publisher. That’s the truth.

The dark side

Now that you’ve become comfortable with your creative routine and have become fluent with your story premise, and pitching it to whoever will listen, the next steps are what I consider ways to muster up the courage to enter the dark side, if you dare.

We creative types are different. I don’t know about you, but I’m more right than left brained. Which makes me more creative than analytical.

In school, I was horrible at math mainly because it was too theoretical for me.

“Why does the x axis go sideways and the y axis go up and down,” my 7th grade algebra teacher Mrs. Brundy stared at me over the tops of her glasses and never had a straight answer.

I couldn't relate to story problems either. “If there are two bundles with 10 sticks each, how many sticks do you have?” What are sticks and bundles, if they are so cool, why did I not get any in my Christmas stocking?

Math eventually made more sense when I learned the practical applications, like how fast I'd have to drive to only be 10 minutes late and not 15 minutes late, or how to fudge just enough on my 1040 tax form deductions to get away with them. Eventually, business accounting, creating balance sheets, and profit and loss statements using excel spreadsheets came much easier.

My left and right brains are much more balanced.

Once you have your story premise, outline and synopsis, if you have enough guts to try, those are good starting points to start thinking about how to monetize your writing or otherwise turn your creative hobby into a business.

If there's anything that takes courage, it's stepping off the edge and trying to get people to give you money for your ideas written on paper, painted on a stretched canvas, or performed on the live stage, particularly since the competition are bookstores, galleries and concert halls.

It's all about distribution and cutting out as many middle people as possible. I don't know this for sure, but my guess is the concept of agency became intertwined in the creative industries because artists didn't have much of a handle on the business side of their work.

Independent musicians are one of the fastest growing sectors in the creative industries with artists now self-distributing their music through a variety of mainstream platforms like Amazon and iTunes, not to mention the growing number of music distribution apps.

The same holds true for writers who self-publish. The number of self-published books has been growing by 40 percent a year with no signs of slowing down. If the 15,000 writers creating content in the SU&W groups pent-up during the COVID-19 pandemic is any indication, the number of self-published books in the near future will be huge.

On paper, starting a creative industry or figuring out how to sell your work is no different than setting yourself up to make and sell mainstream widgets, except that it's an uphill challenge. I would say that to get financing based on a purchase order for a pallet of toilet paper is easier than getting a bank to loan you money against boxes of your books that just landed on your doorstep from a publisher.

Pursuing your art, even as a hobby, requires the time and effort of a part time job. There are any number of books and youtube videos out there about how to start up a business. The reason I think there are very few DIY sources about how to monetize art, is because artists are not traditionally viewed as a part of the economic base.

There are various arts advocacy organizations that count the numbers of artists and art related businesses then quantifying the impact creative industries have on local economies.

Even though a 2018 study conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts estimates that the arts contribute \$764 billion to the national economy, the creative industries are not recognized as real employment comparable to say, being an auto assembly worker, or a software engineer.

I think that's largely because we're too diffuse - actors who are really assembly workers, or creative writers who are really software engineers.

Society has positioned artists as add-on quality of life amenities to a community, rather than integrated as a part of the community fabric.

“Move your business to our town because we have lots of artists here to entertain you,” is a typical economic development come-on.

Adding value to an art business is a challenge when the competition is with high paying, steady jobs. For a number of years now school curricula have been emphasizing Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) to better prepare students, particularly girls for the digital workforce.

A number of influencers, including author Daniel Pink, advocate for whole brain learning not just for young people, but for transforming the economy when he observes, “We are moving from an economy and a society built on the logical, linear, computer-like capabilities of the Information Age to an economy and a society built on the inventive, empathic, big-picture capabilities of what’s rising in its place, the Conceptual Age.”

One example, I developed and completed a pilot project while teaching a group of Northern Arapaho students on the Wind River Indian Reservation in west central Wyoming to retell traditional tribal folktales by integrating virtual reality. Phase II developed a curriculum for high schools to integrate VR into storytelling, but that project has stalled because of the COVID-19 self-isolation protocols.

As early as medieval times, artists and musicians were servants employed by aristocratic households. During the classical period, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was under the patronage of the Archbishop of Salzburg. His contemporary Franz Josef Hayden spent much of his career as a court musician along with the other servants for a ritzy family in Austria.

Regardless, to build courage while getting ready to jump, think your business through by writing a business plan. I won’t go into what goes into that except to say that if you write a great premise for your project and keep expanding it out into a living strategy, you’ll better understand

your calculated risks.

I have a writer friend who quit their job, and sold a house to hang around other writers and be a full time writer. Eventually, casting one's fate to the wind becomes a practical matter and when it starts to be throwing good money after bad, the river runs dry. As far as I know, their adventure didn't work out.

Planning is less courageous than it is common sense, and generally includes defining your core business, and why you're such a terrific person to get this party started. Next, you'll identify what might happen when you jump off the cliff and who might buy into your idea, and keep you from drowning in the river below. Making money while you're sleeping is the ultimate goal.

That generally includes how to fund your project. Maybe that's a job, or inheritance from grandma, or an insurance settlement from a rear end collision. You don't want to end up like Hayden out on the streets trying to make a go of it and struggling as a freelancer.

Life is a gestalt, as for myself, I really didn't know I would end up working in the creative industries until life happened and it took me boarding one ship that dropped me at one port, where I finally got on the right barge that navigated me to my final destination.

I have found that courage comes during extraordinary times and pushes ordinary people to overcome pressure to survive. In my case, figuring out how to make money wasn't life and death pressure, but certainly life pressure. The circumstances that forced me into being a writer, wasn't of my choosing.

Every writer has their own process. Some people write linearly from beginning to the end. Others start with vignettes or scenes and piece the story together and polish their words as they go. The problem with these approaches, the projects seldom get finished or take a long time to finish due to the misguided notion of writing to perfection. Writing by definition is imperfect.

As a hedge, I've found that surrounding myself with writers who strive to finish their work forces me to walk my talk, and that takes the pressure off when I'm writing with other courageous people who have the guts to tell their true stories.

Like the Cowardly Lion, I don't mix up courage with wisdom, and have a medal from the Wizard of Oz to prove it.

Always Be Closing

"Oh, have I got your attention now? Good. 'Cause we're adding a little something to this month's sales contest. As you all know, first prize is a Cadillac El Dorado. Anyone want to see second prize? Second prize is a set of steak knives. Third prize is you're fired. You get the picture? ... Only one thing counts in this life. Get them to sign on the line which is dotted. You hear me? ... A-B-C. A-always, B-be, C-closing. Always be closing." Alec Baldwin as Blake, the motivational guest speaker in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992)

Creative people are not normal. We are square pegs. If you are a creative person and comfortable living a complacent life and haven't found yourself backed onto the top ledge of a high cliff yet, with a rushing river below, and wonder what jumping off would feel like, at least provide yourself a tightly woven safety net.

In my case, being a curious generalist, I've pretty much floundered around my entire adult working life. Since I started out in public service, I could have settled down someplace and blended into a cubicle. I would have landed in some desk job someplace, had a piece of retirement cake from the grocery store, hung another plaque on the wall, and let life pass me by.

I've always been way too curious for that, and got off to a head start on life. I've thrived on all the brain damage that goes along with reinventing myself over and over, weed-whacking new swaths through the ever changing employment landscape.

Every choice I've made over time could have been better. I was busy making mistakes as fast as I could, but despite how hard I tried to get on the right ship, my travels drifted around with the currents and led to port, where I grew up to be a creative industry entrepreneur (aka, a starving artist).

I haven't had a steady paycheck since 2006, which means I have to "Always Be Closing." If you decide to take this ghost ship, at least starting out, attempting to work on one big project, like the great American novel, may be impractical when it comes to keeping your scuppers open.

If you're reading this, you are likely still working, or for whatever reasons, you are not working and looking for something to do and thinking about entrepreneurship.

Unless you have extra money laying around from a job severance package, or a rich uncle, or in my case unemployment insurance and student loans, I suggest you develop your creative business while you're getting paid to do something else.

I have a writer friend who quit their job, and sold a house to hang around other writers and be a full time writer. Eventually, it becomes a practical matter and when throwing good money after bad, it eventually will be time to abandon ship. As far as I know things didn't work out.

"Always Be Closing" doesn't come easy, particularly if you have nothing to sell. My suggestion, have your products, in the forms of story premises in your head ready to regurgitate on a moment's notice with a business card in hand.

In the case of my first and so far only book, I sold it based on a typed out sheet of paper and maybe 20,000 words of back up. I attribute this mostly to being at the right place at the right time, by placing myself in situations that will improve my chances for success. When it comes to buying and selling, buyers always have the edge because they get to choose.

I've always viewed myself as a writer, and paid to write. The difference now, though, I'm

telling my true stories, and not those of someone else. I happen to have the fund raising skill set and able to get my memoir and documentary movie ideas funded with at least a few bucks in hand from grants and talking people into donating a few bucks in exchange for a “thank you” in the movie credits or mention in the back of a book.

Entrepreneurship must have rubbed off on me from all my grandparents who went into businesses for themselves. The biggest challenge of developing ideas is getting other people to buy into them.

Carny closer

“Always Be Closing” reminds me of the weekend I worked as a carnny at the Bill Hames show during CFD many years ago. I wanted to write a first person account of working at the carnival. The experience was interesting and gave me insight into the culture of the American underbelly. I learned survival skills, how to close a deal, how to get people to give me a dollar for nothing.

I flashed my press pass. The carnival is a private enterprise unaffiliated with the rodeo and the gatekeeper didn't let me in unless I paid the entry fee. “Retail is for suckers,” I thought.

After talking my way into the carnival grounds, I took a long stroll around before finding the carnival offices in an innocuous looking trailer. What a throwback to my childhood. There are the unmistakable aromas of atomized corndog oil and steam, and the slightly burnt odor of white sugar spun into cotton candy.

I asked around and met Dozer Simmons. I explained to him why I wanted to work. He hired me on the spot. All the games and rides are privately owned. The barker gets a small cut and the house takes most. I don't think he thought a city guy like me could take standing on my feet and talking non-stop for 12 straight hours.

Money, by Pink Floyd blared from the loudspeaker by the Ferris wheel. It was mid afternoon on Friday. The Wild Horse Race had just ended and the drugstore cowboys and cowgirls were looking for the next afternoon activity.

Dozer paired me up with a youngish blonde-haired carny named Anise. She was a born-again Christian who had a pretty hard life.

“You get ‘em to buy a dart for a dollar, pop a balloon and they win a mirror,” she explained. “You stay on your half of the booth,” she warned. “I won’t hurt you, but there are guys who can get rough if you poach their marks.” A mark is a customer.

Occasionally, a kid would toss the dart in between two balloons. Nothing scattered a crowd faster than a loser, as if the game was somehow rigged, balloons under inflated, too much space between balloons, or whatever.

If it were a really young kid, I would hold him inches from the balloons so as to have a “winner every time.”

Because of my experience as a kid selling pop at the CFD parade, I wasn’t afraid of being told “No.”

I also was oblivious to offensive remarks, because of my first real job at age 12 as a busboy at the Hitching Post Inn, which gave me an appreciation for jerks at an early age.

For the most part everyone was friendly. Closing is based on building relationships with potential customers, “That’s a nice KISS T-shirt you’re wearing, how about winning a matching mirror for your girl?” or “Looks like you spent a lot of money winning that huge teddy bear for the little lady, pop a balloon for a panda mirror and it only costs a dollar - a winner every time.”

I took on politically incorrect character traits being immersed in the carnival culture. Purveying those mannerisms was good for business. To this day, I break into carnival mode

when I have to close a deal.

Lag time was spent slipping the square mirrors into cardboard sleeves. No matter how careful, microscopic glass shards cut my hands. I inflated 150 balloons and my jaw muscles hurt. Tying the balloons wore down my cuticles. My hands bled all weekend. “I got blistahs on my fingahs” to paraphrase John Lennon and *Helter Skelter*.

When I got busy, my back was to the crowd. Thumb tacking up more balloons or fetching a mirror for a winner, and keeping up the endless personal chatter with everyone waiting their turn was tiresome. I didn’t want them to walk away since all players are potential return customers.

There was a little kid who had walked by the booth several times. He was lost. I pulled the boy aside when I saw him crying. “Just wait here,” I assured him. “Your parents will be by any minute now.”

There’s a *Seinfeld* episode called *The Movie* (1993) when Kramer, Jerry, and Elaine are waiting for each other at the movie theater but keep missing each other because everyone was moving around while looking.

Sure enough, the boy was soon reunited with his mom and dad. I imagine they disparaged carnies when they scolded him for wandering off, “You stay close, you might get kidnapped and have to join the carnival.” They were gracious, though, and gave me a couple bucks for my trouble.

A winner every time.

I ended up working the entire weekend and made Dozer quite a bit of money. As it turns out, I’m a pretty good closer.

CFD was done.

It was 2:15 a.m. on Monday. The music had stopped and it was time to strike the carnival.

The process is called the “slough.” Dozer handed me a wad of \$1 bills, and shook my hand. I changed clothes, and handed him back his shirt, “Keep it. I’ll see you next year.”

It was the toughest hundred bucks I have ever earned. I should have asked about the split. I bought a pool stick from one of the carnival vendors as a memento and blew the rest on corn dogs and funnel cakes. That stick was lost in my last move.

Writing this story, I decided to replace it and got a good deal on a “Sneaky Pete” Meucci stick. “Sneaky Pete” refers to a high-end, and very straight pool cue that looks like a “bar stick” so as to not attract attention when playing serious games.

For what it’s worth, I was only truly hustled once. It was a game for whiskey at the Buckhorn Bar in Laramie. Before I knew it, my opponent had blocked every pocket and then ran the table. I owed him a shot of Jack Daniels on the rocks.

If you ever are fed up with life and dream of running away and joining the carefree life of the carnival, no matter where you go, there you are, and remember to always be closing, your life might depend on it.

Entrepreneurial safety nets

My dad worked for the Coca Cola Bottling Company in Cheyenne for more than 40 years. During a 40 year time span, I’ve had seven full time jobs, and a number of paying gigs. My mom was always concerned that my career path was flighty because I didn’t settle in on one.

I come from a long line of artists who were creative entrepreneurs. My maternal grandmother was an oil painter. She went to Japan later in life for a few years and became a master Japanese flower arranger. The art form is *Ikebana*.

That was one activity we did together in August each summer, making arrangements for the

Laramie County Fair. I had an eye for assembling miniature arrangements, and also told true stories with flowers in the men's category.

We gathered flowers from her garden, and she sprung for some fancy flowers from the florist. Our arrangements were built in her kitchen and dining room. They had to be engineered so they could be taken apart, transported and then reassembled.

Going to the fair was a big family activity. My sister was in 4-H and a member of the neighborhood Mend and Blend Club, which was suburban-based. In the days before the fair she was busy making scratch yellow cakes. There are strict judging criteria. We generally had several cake "failures" that were atilt, but still tasted really good because of the butter. They were stocked up in the freezer to last through the winter.

My mom, like her mom, was a sewer and always did pretty well because she paid attention to detail, like sewing bound buttonholes. She sewed my shirts and when they became tattered, she turned the cuffs and collars to make them last longer. As I grew wider and taller, she altered my trouser waistband and inseams.

My dad's role was that of designated driver. After pulling up to the fairgrounds and unloading at the front door, we all went our separate ways.

My grandmother and I headed to the floral display areas. When I was a kid I had allergies and inhaling the various pollen from flowers and the hay bales placed around the exhibit hall for seating made me sneeze.

When I left for college, I was the defending men's flower arranging champion. Unfortunately, my family moved to Laramie and I was unable to defend my blue ribbon the next summer.

Grandma also became a master Japanese doll maker. She ran a clothing alteration business

out of the back bedroom and could sew and fix anything made out of fabric, including doll-sized *kimonos*.

After my grandfather retired from what became known as the Burlington Northern railroad, he became a landscape artist and gardener, mostly for families around his neighborhood. While Grandma made art out of small plants, Grandpa sculpted trees and created large-scale *bonsai* gardens, including in my family's front yard.

On my paternal grandparent's side, after my grandfather returned to Wyoming from being detained in California at the Tulare Assembly Center, they lost their agricultural produce business and started over from scratch.

After the War, he ended up buying a pool hall in the Japanese community from a family that ended up living up the street. He was a survivor and I think a pool hustler, and a good closer.

At that same time, out of necessity, my grandmother was hired to work as a cook next door at the City Cafe. She then opened the Highway Cafe. After my grandfather died and my grandmother was no longer able to cook, my dad had the chance to take over the restaurant. He wasn't the entrepreneurial type and the place was closed.

I often wonder what my life would have been like had my family kept the place open. I would have liked running a family business. As it turned out, I ended up around food. My first real job after hanging around the Highway Cafe was as a busboy at the Hitching Post Inn in Cheyenne. Learning to deal with jerks at an early age was also a beneficial life skill.

As such, my parents were supportive of my interest in the arts. I must have been 10 or 11. At my grandparent's Highway Cafe, there was a box of matches by the cigarettes and candy next to the cash register.

One of the matchbook advertisements was for an art school based in Minnesota. "Draw Me"

was the teaser. I did and mailed in a pencil-drawn caricature of a stereotypical hobo clown. The image reminded me of Clem Kaddidlehopper played by Red Skelton on TV. These days, making light of homelessness isn't very funny.

I was contacted back - maybe everyone is contacted - and a traveling salesman came by the house. I think he was surprised that I was a kid. My parents were willing to pay the school tuition. The introvert in me told me to decline. I've often wondered how my life would have turned out had I enrolled at that correspondence school.

I was so accustomed to working a regular job, I avoided the brain damage of entrepreneurship and became complacent. I was always obsessed with the work I did, always wanting to please my bosses.

Unfortunately, my bosses weren't always as obsessed as I was with my work. Working for myself just wasn't an option that crossed my mind until I was forced into it.

When I was laid off the first time from the domestic violence prevention agency, even with a couple weeks notice, it was a drastic change. I wasn't ready, particularly to pick up the payments on the health insurance.

At this point, I should have thought about developing some business idea. What that would be hadn't crossed my mind.

Even with Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1986 (COBRA) protections, out of pocket premiums were out of reach. I ended up signing up for a high deductible plan from Kaiser Permanente, which I kept active with my new job, and continued after I was laid off the second time and still on Kaiser.

A few years ago, I was in San Francisco visiting my cousin and became very ill with a fever, aches, pains, and congested lungs. I was screening one of my documentaries in Santa Rosa and

hoped to get a little better before I stayed over with a friend who was hosting the program. I did get well enough to make the drive north, but that's fodder for another story.

There was a Kaiser medical center not far from where my cousin lived and I was able to be treated on the spot. I now have a primary care doctor, if I ever get sick in California again.

Health insurance is a high priority and for future reference being double covered was one less headache as I was getting my life stabilized.

Personal financial advisors pitching their services on TV talk shows say that everyone should have a couple months of "just in case" money readily available for emergency situations like an unexpected cash flow stoppage.

When I was laid off the first time, I had some saved away, but it was still a struggle. I'm obsessed with collecting sports cards - mostly baseball cards - and decided to pay day-to-day expenses with credit cards, rather than part with any of my collection.

I rationalized that my baseball cards are my retirement fund. Unfortunately, I'm pretty sure I can't pay my electric bill with the 1962 Mickey Mantle card I carry around with me all the time.

I remember a guy who was a small time bookie trying to make some fast money on the Tommy "Hitman" Hearns (32-0) vs. Sugar Ray Leonard (31-1) welterweight championship bout at Caesar's Palace on September 16, 1981. We played in the same slow pitch softball league.

Leonard was the early favorite but the odds swung to Hearns, late. I had a few bucks on Sugar Ray. As luck would have it, Hearns was ahead on points, but the referee stopped the fight in the 14th round with Leonard winning by Technical Knockout unifying the welterweight title.

That night, I got a call. My bookie friend couldn't cover his bets, because of the upset and was skipping town. He begged me to buy his football card collection to settle our debt and to get him some cash.

I met him in front of the hardware store where we made the deal. I bought them sight unseen. After looking at the cards, I overpaid, but felt sorry for him. You just never know when a guy might need some “just in case” cash.

At this point, I hadn't saved much “just in case cash,” and my liquidity still tied up in baseball cards. I again needed a steady gig and six months later was hired on to do development work for a Denver-based positive youth development non profit.

Meanwhile, my dad was on his last legs in hospice at the hospital in Cheyenne. He was at the end of a good life after living the last couple years with a chronic lung disease. It was Friday. We had a good talk about my new job that was set to start on Monday August 18. We said farewell, I drove back to Boulder and was going to return on Monday afternoon after work. I got the call from my mom that he died that day.

Monday afternoon, I returned to Cheyenne. It was kind of a bummer, but I'd spent the previous week with him and had some good one on one visits. One of the main reasons I moved to Boulder from Lander was to be closer to southeast Wyoming. I spent quite a bit of time driving back and forth.

After skipping the first week of work I returned the following Monday to a big surprise. The woman who hired me suddenly quit to take a new job with the incoming mayor. She was the brains behind the organization. The person who took her place was an internal promotion and also feeling her way around.

I mentioned that I get very obsessed with my job. My strategy is to figure out a project or activity that has immediate success. I discussed many ideas during my interview.

The other thing I didn't know was the organization was funded by one revenue source that was soon expiring, without a diversified income stream. The guy who preceded me was more of

a marketing person. The organization hadn't put much thought into how to get their markets to contribute money.

I was brought on after it was too late. I was able to help them keep the boat afloat for a while, but ultimately I was laid off and the organization eventually went out of business.

My preparation for this second layoff was a little better, but it was the last straw and the last time I worked for someone else. I dusted off my entrepreneur cap and became obsessed by working for myself.

I knew the drill, apply and get approved to collect unemployment insurance, look for work, get retrained.

It wasn't until my *Beyond Heart Mountain* memoir writing journey that I figured out that I did have one job skill, which was writing that spanned my seven real jobs in three cities, and an avocation as a youth.

Turned out all those were dream jobs because I was able to write in all of them and get paid. I just didn't think of myself as a writer.

As for myself, being forced to the brink of a high jagged cliff and jumping off like Butch and Sundance evading the Mexican army, was a matter of survival. I was hungry and growing tired of working for incompetent bosses.

I jumped.

Not knowing if the raging river below was deep enough to catch my fall turned me into an optimist. Once I swam to shore, dried myself off and slipped into some clean clothes, I caught a ride with a passerby in a canoe and haven't looked up to see from where I leapt. I keep waiting for a different boat to take me to my next destination.

The Gleaners

“I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship.” - Louisa May Alcott

I may have mentioned that during my COVID-19 self-isolation, I’ve had time to rummage through boxes of stuff. I purged seven big plastic boxes of paper, old camera equipment and sundry junk. Buried among other flat items, was a framed print of a painting called *The Gleaners*.

It’s an 1857 oil painting by Jean-Francois Millet. The time period is shortly after one of several French Revolutions, this one in 1848. The subjects are three peasant women bent over a wheat field and meticulously picking up individual grains that fell from the chaff to the ground during the harvest.

The image hung over the headboard in the master bedroom at my grandparents’ house in Cheyenne. My grandfather Sakata worked for the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy railroad as the Orpha section foreman during the Great Depression. Railways are broken down into sections that are designated for maintenance or signaling. Orpha is located near Douglas, Wyoming.

“Compared to many people, we were okay,” my grandmother explained about why she bought the print from a traveling salesman. Railroad workers were considered to be “essential” workers.

How does this relate to the true story of a mediocre writer?

After the French Revolution of 1848, the lowest societal classes didn’t have far to fall compared to the upper classes. They still struggled but able to glean for themselves. *The Gleaners* message is about simple truths and making do when times are tough.

After I dug out this print during my sorting and sifting, I began to think that this is the time for creative people to rise up. I think it’s a good opportunity because the playing field is more level.

I'm a member of a writing group that met face to face, but then moved online. Not only do I write with my local group, I've met a variety of writers writing their true sentences hovering over their keyboards in any number of SU&W groups all over the world the past few months.

We're writing all kinds of stuff from fiction and nonfiction books, poetry, love letters, journaling, grants, academic papers. If there are words involved, they are being organized into compositions.

But what about intent, I know there are many who are writing with the intention of getting published or self publishing.

Some of my new virtual friends and colleagues haven't ever written seriously, or maybe did write but it was a long time ago. COVID-19 self-isolation has freed up time resulting in a renaissance of creativity. Not just among writers, but all art forms. I have a painter friend in Gillette, Wyoming who has been more prolific than he was in the past. My friend Jennifer painted like crazy and hung a show in her garage during the pandemic and in the middle of a raging forest fire.

Back in the spring when COVID-19 was first recognized as a big problem, I wrote up a blog post about my impressions of those early days when there were toilet paper shortages and runs on SPAM were happening at the grocery store. You would have thought that one desperate shopper's last meal was going to be the only can of Beeferoni standing on the shelf, and chased down by a bottle of blue Gatorade.

Around Memorial day, an email came across the desk from a small magazine called *Communities* seeking content for an upcoming issue about "Isolation and Connection; Community in the Age of Coronavirus."

I sent them a link to the COVID-19 story I wrote, "Use this if you want."

I'd forgotten about it and then heard back in early July that they decided to publish it. We went back and forth a few times in the editing process during an early morning SU&W session. The final draft was close enough and the story was put to bed.

I heard back and it's the cover story in the upcoming edition. No money in my pocket, but a complimentary subscription for the year.

Receiving validations like this from time-to-time are appreciated and keep me saying to myself, "I got this" with the hope that I'll be given a ticket to board yet another ship to an unknown port of call.

During self-isolation, I'm a more intentional gleaner than before. I think all creative people are gleaners.

Our job is to glean all we can from our stories that may be unseen deep down inside of us, maybe hidden from view because we've ignored them, or tried to forget.

Over the years, I've had my share of setbacks and periods of self doubt as well as successes. I'm definitely more resilient, especially these days and write true sentences about the good, the bad, and the ugly about my feelings and experiences. They flow out of my fingers like they happened yesterday.

Considering I should be dead and not writing this book, my brush with death in 2014 when I rose from the dead was a life-altering experience.

I hope you're not shocked into writing by experiences like what happened to me.

It has to be easier to get to the ship terminal a little early, leisurely board, slowly drift out to sea, and hope you land at a tranquil port of call where they give away coconut drinks with little paper umbrella swizzle sticks.

Over time, I've developed the most confidence writing first hand accounts and reflections

about my experiences. So far, it's been a vagabond life, but that's the Hemingway in me.

I'm living proof that perfection is highly overrated. On top of that I've never learned to sail, except in the allegorical sense.

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