

MADMAN, ARCHITECT, CARPENTER, JUDGE: ROLES AND THE WRITING PROCESS

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"What's the hardest part of writing?" I ask on the first day of class.

"Getting started," someone offers, groaning.

"No, it's not getting started," a voice in the back of the room corrects. "It's keeping on once you do get started. I can always write a sentence or two-but then I get stuck."

"Why?" I ask.

"I don't know. I am writing along, and all of a sudden I realize how awful it is, and I tear it up. Then I start over again, and after two sentences, the same thing happens."

"Let me suggest something which might help," I say. Turning to the board, I write four words: "**madman,**" "**architect,**" "**carpenter,**" "**judge.**"

Then I explain:

madman "What happens when you get stuck is that two competing energies are locked horn to horn, pushing against each other. One is the energy of what I'll call your 'madman.' He is full of ideas, writes crazily and perhaps rather sloppily, gets carried away by enthusiasm or anger, and if really let loose, could turn out ten pages an hour.

judge "The second is a kind of critical energy-what I'll call the 'judge.' He's been educated and knows a sentence fragment when he sees one. He peers over your shoulder and says, 'That's trash!' with such authority that the madman loses his crazy confidence and shrivels up. You know the judge is right - after all, he speaks with the voice of your most imperious English teacher. But for all his sharpness of eye, he can't create anything.

"So you're stuck. Every time your madman starts to write, your judge pounces on him.

"Of course this is to over-dramatize the writing process-but not entirely. Writing is so complex, involves so many skills of heart, mind and eye, that sitting down to a fresh sheet of paper can sometime seem like 'the hardest work among those not impossible,' as Yeats put it.

Whatever joy there is in the writing process can come only when the energies are flowing freely-when you're not stuck.

"And the trick to not getting stuck involves separating the energies. If you let the judge with his

intimidating carping come too close to the madman and his playful, creative energies, the ideas which form the basis for your writing will never have a chance to surface. But you can't simply throw out the judge. The subjective personal outpourings of your madman must be balanced by the objective, impersonal vision of the educated critic within you. Writing is not just self-expression; it is communication as well.

"So start by promising your judge that you'll get around to asking his opinion, but not now. And then let the madman energy flow. Find what interests you in the topic, the question or emotion that it raises in you, and respond as you might to a friend-or an enemy. Talk on paper, page after page, and don't stop to judge or correct sentences. Then, after a set amount of time, perhaps, stop and gather the paper up and wait a day.

"The next morning, ask your *architect* 'architect' to enter. She will read the wild scribblings saved from the night before and pick out maybe a tenth of the jottings as relevant or interesting. (You can see immediately that the architect is not sentimental about what the madman wrote; she is not going to save every crumb for posterity.) Her job is simply to select large chunks of material and to arrange them in a pattern that might form an argument. The thinking here is large, organizational, paragraph level thinking-the architect doesn't worry about sentence structure.

"No, the sentence structure is left for the *carpenter* who enters after the essay has been hewn into large chunks of related ideas. The carpenter nails these ideas together in a logical sequence, making sure each sentence is clearly written, contributes to the argument of the paragraph, and leads logically and gracefully to the next sentence. When the carpenter finishes, the essay should be smooth and watertight.

"And then the judge comes around to inspect. Punctuation, spelling, grammar, tone-all the details which result in a polished essay become important only in this last stage. These details are not the concern of the madman who's come up with them, or the architect who's organized them, or the carpenter who's nailed the ideas together, sentence by sentence. Save details for the judge.