

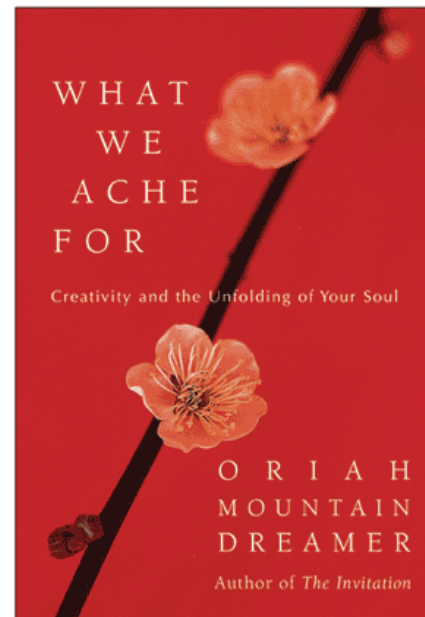
Character and Situation

I read Stephen King's book *On Writing* years ago and was fascinated by his description of starting with nothing more than a character and a situation when writing fiction. He describes how the plot comes out of this combination as the character develops and is revealed by the situation, which is of course also developing and changing.

I hadn't given the act of writing a novel much thought before because I had been writing primarily nonfiction, but I think I had assumed it would necessitate knowing in advance what was going to happen, where the plot would take both writer and reader. And I have, on occasion, enjoyed books like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* that are primarily plot-driven. But the stories that interest me most as both a reader and a writer have an organic and unpredictable flow that arises from the unfolding of characters in vividly depicted situations.

So, I look for characters—real or imagined—and situations that catch my attention and then write about what might happen if the two were brought together in likely or unlikely combinations. This can make for some interesting writing warm-ups. One way to do this is to carry a notebook and keep an ongoing list of characters and situations that pop up. Sometimes I just observe people passing by as I sit in the local diner or wait in line at the bank, allowing my imagination to come up with names, histories, and character traits based on what I observe about their clothing, stance, or interaction with others. Anything—my conversations with the woman who works at the post office or the fellow who delivers the firewood—can offer me a number of details that hint at characters I can create. I listen to a radio interview with the man who holds the world record for tearing phone books in half with his bare hands (I am not making this up) and wonder about his life, his training, his resolve. I watch the woman who paces up and down the main street of a nearby village in the summer wearing a short black skirt, a tight sweater with a plunging neckline, and stiletto heels amidst farmers in coveralls and rubber boots. I wonder and imagine what she is thinking and feeling, where she came from and why she is here.

Similarly, I watch for situations that catch my eye or ear. I listen carefully to the local store owner's story about a dead cat being nailed to her front door by a churchgoing neighbor who objects to her selling books about earth-based spirituality. I pay attention to the radio report



about two deserters from the U.S. military who are seeking refugee status in Canada because they do not want to fight in what they feel is an unjust war. I read with fascination and sadness the news story about a family who held a funeral for a son lost to gang violence only to find out the next day that their son was lying in a coma at the hospital. The family sitting at the hospital at the bedside of the bandaged form they believed to be their son was devastated to learn that he had been buried the day before.

When it comes time to do a writing warm-up I pick a character and a situation and put them together, deliberately making a choice or letting the combination come about randomly: the woman walking the village street as the store owner who discovers the cat nailed to her door; the man who rips phone books apart finding out that the son he thought was dead is alive.

Writing brief character or situation descriptions on bits of paper and then choosing one from each pile and writing something that brings the two together can be done alone or in a group. In a group you might have everyone contribute one character and one situation summary and then pick one of each at random. Or you might want to see the variety that flourishes when everyone in the group writes about the same combination. The trick is to keep the writing time short—thirty minutes maximum—to stop you from trying to “figure out” where the writing should go and to encourage you to let what happens simply flow from the combination of the character and the situation in your imagination.

Make a list of characters. For each, designate at least five of the following: name, gender, age, occupation, physical characteristics, religious affiliation, economic status, marital status, and one pervasive habit.

Now make a list of situations drawing on recent news reports, family stories, historical events, or some of your own worst-case/best-case fantasies (accidents and illnesses, lottery wins, and coincidental meetings). Keep the descriptions in the present tense to avoid long back stories and be specific (not “bumping into someone famous on the street” but “crashing headlong into Julie Andrews coming out of a grocery store with her arms filled with bags of oranges”).

Now pick one or two characters and put them in a situation you have described. Write for thirty minutes and let what happens unfold.

Based on *What We Ache For* by Oriah Mountain Dreamer, published by HarperSanFrancisco, 2005