

Back when I was buying books with titles like *THINK BIG!! But There May Be Shrinkage* or *THE 7 STEPS TO CREATING YOUR OWN REALITY With Watercolors*, I came across a little “Exercise” that gave me hours of narcissistic free-wheeling. They came at the expense of income-producing hours, but the exchange felt like a bargain.

(I rarely did the exercises recommended in these books. In fact, the more exercises in the book, the more likely I was to deliberately leave it in the men’s john at McDonalds or on a park bench. Not only did this allow me to make a clean break with a book that had lost its *savoir faire*, I felt like a Cosmic Lending Library. If “creating my own reality” was going to require changing my habits and doing the hard stuff, whether I wanted to or not, I might as well buck up, face into the wind, leave the silly book on a bus seat, and get off at the Unemployment Office.)

That said, occasionally I came across an Exercise with an Effort-To-Entertainment Ratio I could live with. My favorite goes something like this:

Imagine that you have won the lottery. Make sure the payoff you have imagined is enough to solve all those little subsidiary lottery problems, like taxes and alimony.

Perhaps the most important item to imagine is “Dave.” Dave is the guy I would hire, if I won the lottery, to do all the shit I don’t want to do. Maintenance, mostly. If the roof gutters are squirming with mosquito larvae because they haven’t been cleaned for three years, and the “Clap-On / Clap-Off” gizmo has stopped working, I just call Dave, who is now on my lottery winnings payroll:

“Dave, get your skinny ass over here and pick up the List Of Shit Flipper Doesn’t Want To Do Anymore Now That He’s Won The Lottery.” Dave doesn’t mind, because I would be paying him seventy-five-bucks-an-hour just to manage the Shit List. Dave doesn’t have to DO stuff on the list, he just has to make sure somebody does it. Then I pay the bills. *No problema*.

So, in our little Exercise, let’s say you’ve imagined your way to a day when you wake up in the morning and *there’s nothing weighing on your mind*. You’re debt free, the kids are taken care of, you’ve bought the condo on Maui, replaced your Cavalier with a Carrera, and Dave’s on top of Maintenance. The day yawns in front of you, and, for the first time in your life, you are existential-*angst*-free and have buttocks of money. What would you do?

That’s it, that’s The Exercise, and it will clear a lot of bullbleep out of your head. You may have thought, for example, that you wanted to be a “writer,” but all the actual *writing* you would have to do is more than you feel like taking on, now that you could *pay* for sex, yet probably won’t have to, at least directly. You daydreamed about being an independent filmmaker, but why would you spend hours learning how to use editing software when you could just *hire* Young Computer People to do that shit? See what I mean about bullbleep clearing?

So, here I am, just deposited my paycheck and paid my rent. I still have over four-hundred bucks in my account, and the weekend is upon me. I’m feeling good, and I’m doing The Exercise. Here’s what I come up with:

I have to mull these *writer* or *moviemaker* daydreams. When I did the “for example,” earlier, I wasn’t just pulling random doohickies off the “For Example” shelf.

I wanted to be a writer as soon as I figured out that grownups would leave me alone for hours at a time if I was reading. Books were gifts from heaven for a withdrawn little twit. When I was reading out loud from the King James Bible at three, the aunties and uncles were a little annoying with their fussing over me, but, sometimes they’d give me a quarter, or let me pick a chocolate out of the *Whitman Sampler* box. “Oh, what a *smart* boy, Flipper, but remember to flush next time you read in the *loo*, okay? Lord have mercy!” I have no idea why my Uncle Knut called it “the *loo*.” He was a flipping Norwegian, never set foot outside flipping Ballard. I don’t think he ever left Gramma Birget’s house, except for holidays at our house, two blocks away. I still nurse the hope that I’ll find another Uncle Knut who will pay me just for being a good speller.

As for the Movie Making item, that’s because of my filmmaker buddy, Rick, the only Famous Person in my cellphone auto-dialer. For some reason that I never asked about, he and his wife moved to Big Rock from LA. Until he moved back to Hollywood to teach film school, we had breakfast, every Wednesday, for ten years. It’s still a mystery why he bothered with me, after he

and Jillian came in to have me do their wills. I miss him. He's good about emailing, but it's not the same as biscuits and gravy and two quarts of coffee.

The Rickster was *way* ahead of his time. Before you could buy a MiniDV Camera off Ebay with a six-year-old's allowance, back when men were men, grownup women still liked men, and you had to make movies with *film*, Rick Schmidt was *the* guru for all the busboys and burger flippers who wanted to be the next Francis Ford Coppola. He had figured out how to make a feature length movie, on film, for under three-thousand bucks, albeit this was back when three-thousand bucks would buy a three-bedroom house in some parts of America, if you didn't mind living in a state where it was legal to marry your half-sister.

Then he worked up the *cojones* to call a publisher with an idea about a book with a snappy title incorporating the *Making Movies for the Price of a Hillbilly Duplex* theme. They bought it, and the book was *The Bible* for fifteen years. For all I know, it is still *The Bible*. One film historian actually wrote a piece about the "Rick Schmidt Era" in indie filmmaking.

My first experience of an altered state not induced by a *hookah*, came when Rick let me be in one of his movies. I wandered around for two weeks in a delirium of improvisation and shop talk. If I'd been having sex with Brenda at the time, I would have yelled "that's a WRAP" when I peaked.

So, if I won the Big Door Prize, I would have to give some thought to having Dave pick up a copy of *Writer's Market* and shop for cameras and sound gear. I would give this some thought for about two minutes. We've already discussed this: There's way too much paperwork in writing, and too much technical doodoo in moviemaking, for a chap who now owns the bank.

Once you clear the *bushwah* out of your head, about what you would do if you were Bill Gates without the empire management duties, the degree of difficulty escalates. I've done *The Exercise* for almost five years, now, and I still don't have a satisfying answer. But, this morning, as I was congratulating myself for waking up with morning wood for the first time in weeks, I had something that felt like *An Idea*.

What if I'm lifting my leg on the wrong fire hydrant trying to come up with a *Job Description*? It's one thing if you're flipping Michael Jordan or Elton John, but, if you've never experienced that level of specialized talent, it's hard to get your imagination around the learning curve required to levitate or sing and play the piano at the same time. It came to me that I might be better off looking for what it is about the *idea* of Writing or Moviemaking that puts the vinegar in my pickle.

I think I might know what it is:

It's *The Mystery*. Not "*a mystery*", as novelist Tom Robbins once wrote, but "*THE Mystery, the One That Can Never Be Solved*." Yeah, that's it. It's different for everybody, but you know *exactly* what I'm getting at. Let's talk *Mystery*:

Is it just me, or are the best heroes the ones with at least a 1:1 ratio of scalawag to hero? And, isn't 2:1 even better? And, isn't it "suweeeeet," (but without corn syrup or artificial sweetener) if the scalawaggery includes a whiff of gin and a flash of fishnet knickers? This is the Mysterious Part: I will wager my MacBook, with *two* gigabytes of RAM, that this hero lives in the secret part of *every heart*, even when the heart belongs to someone who wears a Black Robe to work. Even if you are required to take yourself or your job *so seriously* that you must exorcise the color demons from your uniform closet, your secret wish is to be reincarnated as lead guitar player in a really tight southern rock band. Why?

If you try to solve it, you'll just have our hero in jail, or, worse, in therapy. Leave him alone. (One mystery I *do* have to solve is why I can't go ten minutes without thinking about Black Robes and having my bowels go loose.)

What makes only one picture in the gallery *work* for you? How do you name your rock-and-roll band *Death Cab for Cutie* and *know* it's *perfect*? How did the folks in France get to be so *French*?

Don't even try. Keep your grubby little empirical hands off. You'll just screw things up.

Here's one thing about *The Mystery*: I don't think it has anything to do with discovering "God's Will," which is what I used to believe. In fact, I've come to feel that *The Mystery* is the *opposite* of what Mrs. Trimble, my last Sunday School teacher, meant by "God's Will."

I'm going to give it a rest with The Exercise. I've made progress. If I get dealt the Ace High Straight Flush and don't have to *earn* another fucking dollar, I might just spend every waking minute looking into The Mystery.