



By Dan Sapone

## Chasing the Shade

I am sitting at my desk staring at the tip of my fountain pen, hoping for some inspiration; but the words are not coming — not an unfamiliar experience. Ideas, of course, come and go in various stages of completeness, sometimes stimulated by world events, other times from personal experience and observing other people. Among those ‘other people,’ I have had the privilege of being exposed to some wonderful writers over the course of my lifelong education, people like Wilder and Poe, Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Steinbeck and Twain, Frost and DeVore. Some of them made a habit of offering advice to other writers. So, at times of ‘drought’ like these, I’ve dutifully looked to them for guidance.

Staring again at the tip of this fountain pen trying to write my own story, I find that those writers offer a wealth of advice that sometimes seems to be aimed directly at me. Hemingway, the writing teacher I will quote today, is particularly generous with what sounds at first like such simple advice. He compares himself to other writers to provide guidance on the use of language: “Poor Faulkner – does he really think big emotions come from big words? He thinks I don’t know the ten-dollar words. I know them, alright, but there are older and simpler and better words, and those are the ones I use.” That sounds reassuring: use simple words, tell simple stories about real people.

But then, sometimes he can also be a powerfully intimidating teacher of what it takes to be a writer. “All good books,” he wrote, “are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened; and, after you are finished reading one, you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards, it all belongs to you; the good and the bad, the ecstasy and the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places, and how the weather was. If you can get so that you can give that to people, then you are a writer.”

Oh. *That’s what I have to do?!* Can I do *that*? Seems like such a tall order! At least I can emulate his occasional use of long sentences.

I think he tried to be comforting with simpler advice when he wrote: “The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shock-proof shit detector. This is the writer’s radar and all the great writers have had it.” And then, he offers more comfort: “I write one page of masterpiece to ninety-one pages of shit. I try to put the shit in the wastebasket.”

And then, he provides specific guidance on his process: “Write drunk. Edit sober.”

Having gotten the specific advice out of the way, I look for examples to imitate and I find one – simple instructions for improving one’s mood, again from Hemingway, no shit for the wastebasket, strung together into a single long sentence:

“As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold white wine washed away leaving only the sea taste and the succulent texture, and as I drank their cold liquid from each shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans.”

OK. From the small and simple details of taste and texture can come powerful feelings that can make a difference. Hemingway sneaks up on you. I look up from his words and say to myself. “I could have written that.” But I stare at the fountain pen and acknowledge the equally simple truth: “But I didn’t.”

Staring again at the tip of my fountain pen, my mind wanders from Hemingway’s sentence to two simpler, shorter, and more powerful sentences than anything I could have written. These came from two friends of mine, both of whom have been fighting cancer – one for a short time, one for a long time. Katie had shared her feelings in an email shortly after her diagnosis. She wrote about her attempt to bring back the comfort of the time before the cancer. She described an afternoon in the backyard with a task that seemed simple — walk out to the Adirondack chair and sit in the shade with a book and a glass of cold chardonnay. Seeking comfort in the backyard turned out to be a search for a respite from too much of even a good thing like sunshine. A few feet away a lemon tree was providing shade; so the next task was to seek the protection of the stationary tree from the glare of the sun.

As she positions the chair under the tree and gets comfortable in its shade, it didn’t take long to confront the illusion. The shade *seemed* stationary; and yet, in the words of Galileo (as an apology for having saved himself by denying the truth) “*eppur si muove*” “and yet it moves.”

We always seem to seek that illusion of permanence, don’t we — that the sunshine or the shade, whichever we prefer at the moment, will stay put, right where we want it? After some experience, we know better, don’t we? Is it merely the subconscious hope that something comfortable, stable, and safe, can be captured and held close to us? Maybe we eventually learn that growing up is the act of admitting to ourselves,

and accepting, that everything in the universe, everything in the world, everything in ourselves, is moving. After that 'simple' observation, we try to anticipate that motion and move the chair to the place where the shade will end up, and we experience the further truth that nothing really moves in a straight line.

Damn. It was looking simple there for a while.

And then, there's my oldest friend Lew. We met in the dorm at Santa Clara University in 1968 and I have watched him fight cancer for years in one successful battle after another, and then again more recently, leading to a series of treatments that concluded just before flying off to Europe for our long-planned vacation to Italy and France. On the train in Italy, Lew, his wife Rita, and Gretta and I joked that Italian food and French wine were probably the most powerful weapons he could wield against the disease. It was a great trip: the sweetness of Varenna on Lake Como, the bright warm sunshine of the French Riviera, and the calm pastoral setting of the wine country of Provence – a series of 'treatments' as healing as anything one could imagine.

Now for the simple, powerful sentences I promised —

A few days after returning to California came the tests and an appointment with the doctor to learn how effective the treatments had been. And our phone rang. It was Lew with as simple and powerful a sentence as anything Hemingway might have written: "My PSA is zero and they can't find cancer anywhere in my body."

Back to Katie in the Adirondack chair, after getting test results from her doctor, it became simple once again. "There's news," she wrote, "I'm clean; I'm clean."

And now, with all of us back in the shade once again, I'm ready to put the pen to the paper . . .

