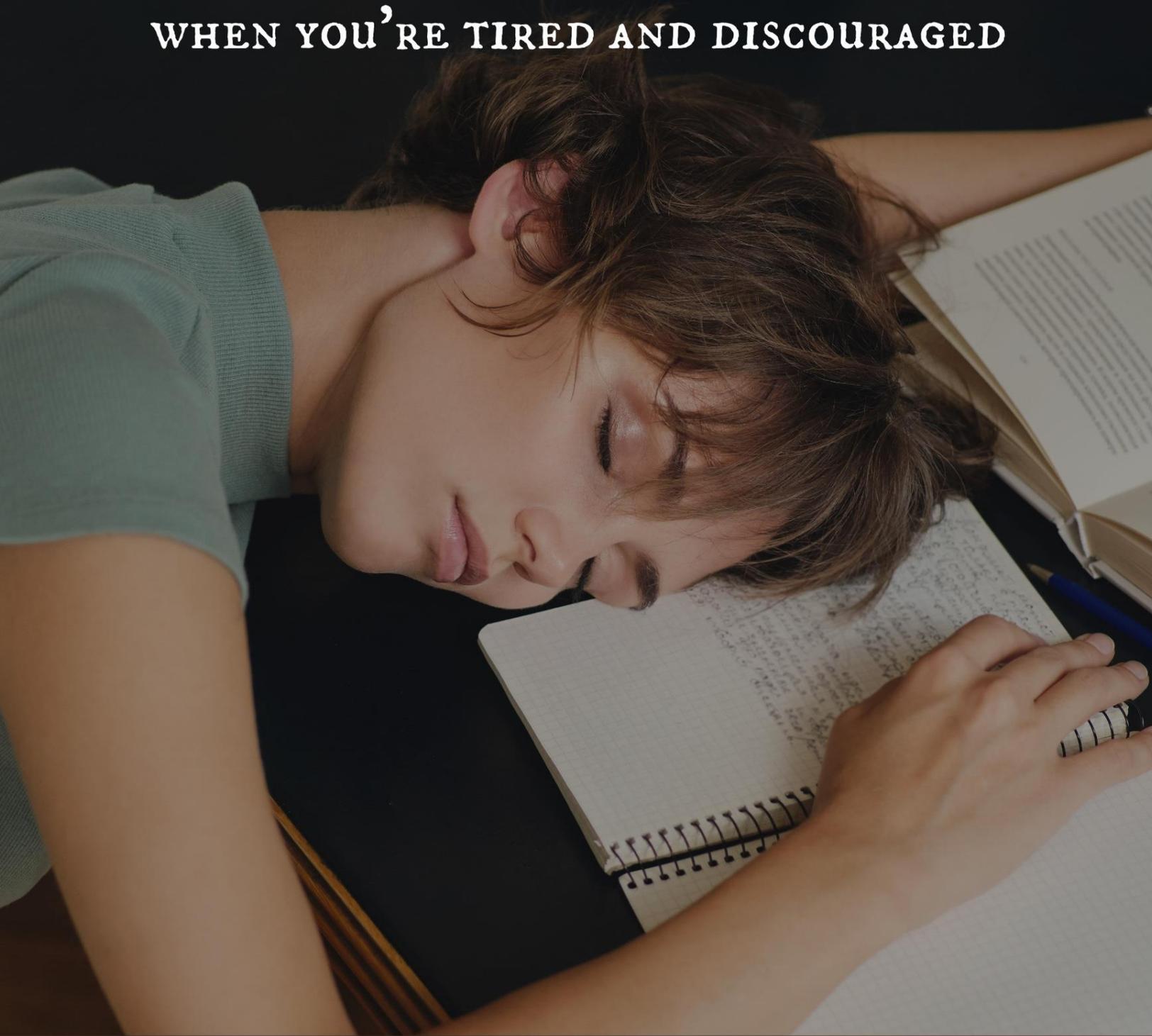


Renewing the Storyteller's Soul

HOW TO RESTORE YOUR CREATIVITY
WHEN YOU'RE TIRED AND DISCOURAGED



StoryEmbers.org



Introduction

When our spiritual and personal lives are in shambles, our writing lives often suffer too.

Writing is a vocation that requires us to draw from our own emotions and experiences to be able to accurately depict the characters and events on the page. It's an intimate act, so when we're feeling worried or discouraged, our creativity shrivels.

We need rest from the stresses pressing down on us—and only by pursuing the One who offers lasting peace can we find joy again.

We originally published the article series contained in this e-book during November 2021, after two years of the global COVID-19 pandemic. We wanted to help Christian writers restore their passion and motivation in the midst of hardship.

We pray that our thoughts renew your soul so you can pick up your pen again and write with purpose.

Josiah DeGraaf
Story Embers Summit & Marketing Director



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Chapter One – Tired Writers Don’t Need More Sleep, They Need More Spiritual Rest

By Mariposa Aristeo, Public Relations Director

Rarely does a day pass anymore without a depressing headline hitting the news. Violence, hate, and fear rampage across your screen. Some days you can’t bear it, so you shut off your devices. You’re done. You want life to be normal again. You want your motivation back. You want to revive the creativity that all of the chaos and uncertainty killed.

But ignoring the news will only give you a false sense of peace that won’t last. “Take a walk. Read a book. Visit a friend,” anxiety taunts. “I’ll return when you’re through.”

You’re tired of hearing that voice, aren’t you? You’re tired from sleepless nights and cranky kids. You’re tired from cramming for college finals. You’re tired from clocking too many hours at two jobs to pay overdue bills. You’re tired, tired, tired.

Maybe you’re even too tired to write.

I’ve been there. I’m usually very driven and disciplined, but last year I struggled with inertia. The question I kept asking myself, and the one you’re probably wrestling with too, is: *How do I reignite my passion and energy for storytelling?*

When I looked to the One whose grace crosses out my weakness, I found the solution.

Christ, Our All

“But as for me, the nearness of God is my good.” (Psalms 73:28)

Every fall, we publish an article series that describes how to pursue the ideals of our Christian Storytellers Manifesto.¹ So far, we’ve covered different components of story craft, like tricky subjects and characters.

¹ “The Christian Storytellers Manifesto,” Story Embers, accessed December 4, 2021, <https://storyembers.org/manifesto>.



But this year we decided to focus on rejuvenating writers' hearts. Due to the turmoil of 2020–2021, we felt that an exploration of the CSM's thirteenth resolution would be timely:

“We resolve to base our confidence in God and not the opinions of others, to rely on God by praying over our writing, and to bury ourselves in Scripture, for we can only exemplify truth when we are immersed in it ourselves.”

At our recent staff retreat, we discussed what placing our confidence in God can look like as writers. We exchanged a variety of thoughts: accepting His timetable for when we achieve publication, seeking His guidance on the themes we choose, and letting scriptural truths permeate our stories. But an equally pivotal question is: *Why* do we place our confidence in God?

The answer might seem so obvious that it's not even worth dwelling on: God is infinite and all-knowing and unchangeable. He mercifully rescued and remade us. *Of course* we'd rely on Him! However, we need to pause and reorient ourselves now and then, or else we're apt to subconsciously forget who we are.

We're Christians first and foremost, not storytellers.

Crafting stories isn't more important than reading God's story. Creating realistic characters isn't more important than nurturing a godly character. Brainstorming a plot twist isn't more important than soaking in the wonders God shows us every day. *He* is our reason for living, working, and writing. Regardless of our current circumstances, our relationship with Him, not our writing, should be our highest priority and most valued gift.

The Lord Jesus Christ is our resource for *every need*, large or small. He is our Savior, our Father, our Friend, our King, our Creator, our Shelter, our Sustainer, our Compass, our Anchor, our Comfort, Our Hope, our Light, and our Rest. He is sufficient for all things—including the mess of words that we're trying to shape into coherent, compelling stories.

Christ's Sufficiency for Storytellers

“For You light my lamp; the Lord my God illumines my darkness. For by You I can run upon a troop; and by my God I can leap over a wall.” (Psalms 18:28–29)

We often define our relationship with Christ in spiritual terms—confession, worship, evangelism, tithing. But He is sovereign over the mundane too. When we're folding laundry, washing dishes, or checking social media, He is there, watching us, loving us, teaching us. So how much closer is He when we're attempting to portray the reality He's designed?



When we draw perimeters around our faith, we also limit our access to blessings.

In the closing keynote for our Authentic Characters Summit, Allen Arnold presented the concept of creating *with* God instead of treating Him as external to the process.² Imagine how much richer our writing time would be if we listened to that advice!

- God’s Word can help us ground our stories in truth.
- God’s Spirit can help us convey the lessons our readers need to learn.
- God’s peace can help us stay calm when we’re overwhelmed with responsibilities.
- God’s presence can help us gather the courage to pitch to agents and publishers.
- God’s power can help us reach the readers our stories will impact.
- God’s compassion can help us create characters readers will empathize with.
- God’s grace can help us handle edits and criticism with humility.
- God’s strength can help us persevere after dozens of rejections.

God can accomplish much more than we realize, and even more than I listed above. Does that mean He’ll immediately fix all of our writing problems and smooth our path to publication? No. A genuine relationship with God involves trusting Him even when the direction He’s leading us in is disappointing.

If our writer’s block refuses to relent, maybe He’s urging us to take a break. If our books aren’t selling, maybe money and fame aren’t necessary to the plan He has for us. But even if He doesn’t hand us a book contract today or an abundance of inspiration tomorrow, He *will* provide the serenity and stamina we need for the troubles we’re facing.

What if our relationship with Christ isn’t as healthy as it should be, though? How can that affect our writing?

A Call Back to Christ

“If Your law had not been my delight, then I would have perished in my affliction.” (Psalms 119:92)

The events of 2020–2021 have put people around the world under emotional, physical, and financial strain. But I believe that spiritual strain is part of the equation too. If we’re honest with ourselves, we don’t

² Allen Arnold, “The Wildness of Creating with God,” (April 26, 2020), Story Embers, <https://storyembers.org/authentic-characters-summit>.



fully understand why God is allowing all of the upheaval. Doesn't He hear our prayers for relief? He seems so distant.

Or maybe *we're* the ones who have slipped farther and farther away. Maybe stress has eroded our communion with Him.

When life assails us, our ability to concentrate decreases. Since writing demands nearly 100 percent of our concentration, either we're pecking out disjointed scenes, or we're not touching our keyboards at all. What's our recourse when that happens? Do we devour K. M. Weiland's *Creating Character Arcs*? Have an intensive brainstorming session? Attend a virtual writers conference?

Although those activities may (or may not) unclog the flow of ideas, the underlying issue (disconnection from Christ), if left unaddressed, will continue to worsen. When we fixate on *our* writing, *our* careers, *our* dreams, we are, as Charles Spurgeon summarizes it, diluting our effectiveness: "When a man has fifty different desires, his heart resembles a pool of water, which is spread over a marsh, breeding miasma and pestilence; but when all his desires are brought into one channel, his heart becomes like a river of pure water, running along and fertilizing the fields. Happy is the man who hath one desire, if that one desire is set on Christ."³

Obsessing over our writing (or anything else) reduces our energy to a near-stagnant trickle, and the lack of movement breeds bacteria. If we yearn to bring glory to God and experience joy in our writing, we first need to reignite our passion for Him. He is the only One who can offer us the refuge we need to write in the midst of trials. As the verse at the beginning of this section states, we'd perish without Him.

Deepening Our Relationship with Christ as Storytellers

"His delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night." (Psalms 1:2)

For those of us raised in Christian homes, prayer and Bible study and church have probably been integral to our routines since childhood. But each of those habits can become rote if we're not careful—an item we scratch off an "I belong to Jesus" checklist. It's our *attitude* that's the game changer. Are we steeping our minds in God's Word throughout the day, or are we reading a couple chapters and then shifting our attention to our jobs, families, and the latest funny meme in our Facebook feed?

³ C.H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Sermons, Volume Three* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2016), p. 92.



For example, during my daily Bible time, I review the same passage for a week, and on Sunday I repeat each verse to myself, rolling the meaning around in my head. I'm not just opening and closing my Bible for a designated number of minutes each day, I'm letting the text saturate my thoughts. That's because I wholeheartedly agree with Charles Spurgeon: "He is not the best student who reads the most books, but he who meditates the most devoutly upon them."⁴

The practice of meditation primarily boosts our spiritual growth, but it can boost our writing growth too. In a sermon about the influence of God's Word on believers, John MacArthur makes an interesting point: "As a Christian, you'll never function on what you don't know. It'll never happen. You'll never be able to operate on the principle you never knew. You'll never be able to apply the truth you haven't discovered. So, as you feed into your mind the Word of God, it becomes a handle by which the Spirit of God directs and guides."⁵

Although MacArthur is referring to the overall scope of the Christian walk here, the same principle applies to writing. We can't infuse our stories with truth if we aren't thoroughly, personally familiar with whatever is honorable, just, pure, lovely, and of good repute.

We need to slow down so that the verses we've read can roam around our minds. We need to think and pray about God's precepts when we wake up and when we go to sleep. Our books can wait. So can our platforms. Because the more intimate we are with God and the Bible, the more our writing and our lives will naturally "reflect and reveal God's story," whether we're conscious of it or not.⁶

Meditation, however, is only *one* aspect of building and maintaining a relationship with Christ. That's why we're going to delve into four other areas over the next couple weeks:

- In chapter two, Josiah will expose common mistakes that writers make in how they approach **prayer**.
- In chapter three, Martin will explain how chronically flat characters may be a sign that we need to expand our **personal growth**.
- In chapter four, Lori will demonstrate how God strengthens us through **trials** so that we can then minister to others through our stories.

⁴ C.H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Sermons, Volume Four* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2016), p. 41.

⁵ John MacArthur, "The Power of the Word in the Believer's Life, Part Two" (July 1, 1979), Grace to You, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/1380/the-power-of-the-word-in-the-believers-life-part-2>.

⁶ Christian Storytellers Manifesto.



- Finally in chapter five, Gabrielle will remind us where our **identity** as writers comes from and debunk the lies that contribute to self-doubt.

Our True Rest

“I have set the Lord continually before me; because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.” (Psalms 16:8)

To the person who has to drag herself out of bed each morning, to the person with more expenses than income, to the person who views his writing as worthless, to the person unable to push past a blinking cursor, to the person alone and scared and wondering *why*...

I hear you, I see you, I feel your pain.

I wish I could assure you that tomorrow will be brighter. That you'll suddenly figure out how to fill in all of your book's plot holes. That the relationship you're aching for will solidify instead of falling apart. That next year will be normal. But I don't know what the future will bring.

What I do know is that, through Christ, we can do all things and endure all things.

Remember that, dear one.

Cling to Him, cast your cares on Him. No matter what hardships befall us, He'll carry us through the darkness to the light on the other side. If we place our confidence in Him, we can do the impossible.

Even write a book.



Chapter Two – Frustrated Writers Don't Need More Answers, They Need More Time with God

By Josiah DeGraaf, Marketing & Summit Director

Sometimes I worry that we spend more time talking to peers about the ins and outs of being a Christian writer than we do asking God to help us flourish at it.

Chatting about ourselves is easy—it's one of our favorite hobbies as humans. And if the other person shares our interests, we can ramble back and forth for hours. But when we speak with our Heavenly Father, other concerns tend to crowd in. An ailing family member. A sin we need to overcome. A decision we're not sure how to make. Prayer is the lifeline that keeps us afloat in the whitecaps. We have no doubts about that! But is it necessary to our *writing*?

From conversations I've had, I get the impression that many writers (myself included) misperceive the purpose of prayer in storytelling. And when we approach the foot of the throne with the wrong mindset, we deprive ourselves of the joy and contentment we could be experiencing. To restore the richness of our fellowship with God, we need to correct three bad habits.

Mistake #1: Rarely Praying about Writing

As I alluded to in my introduction, one of the worst mistakes is not praying about our writing at all! Perhaps we don't bring it up out of forgetfulness or general sluggishness. Sometimes, however, we judge it as inconsequential compared to other matters we could be seeking guidance about. After all, if we were computer engineers or construction workers, would we be making a big deal about praying over our trade? I've heard people downplay the importance of applying a distinctly Christian perspective to writing according to that reasoning.

However, when our profession has the potential to influence the hearts and minds of others, our faith needs to play a more active role in it. Teaching, counseling, pastoring, and writing all fall into this category. Although an accountant's service to his clients, for example, is no less meaningful, a writer has the unique responsibility of accurately depicting both humanity and divinity, which requires additional wisdom that can only come from above.



But how does prayer specifically benefit our writing? Famed southern author Flannery O'Connor remarked in her prayer journal that "I see my ridiculous self by degrees."⁷ When we're conversing with the One who formed us in the womb, we gain an awareness of ourselves that personality tests, new experiences, and even family members can't give us. Timothy Keller agrees: "Prayer is the only entryway into genuine self-knowledge" (*Prayer*, p. 18).⁸ This self-knowledge is essential for us as storytellers, because if we don't understand our own inner life, how can we portray anyone else's? When we're striving to develop authentic characters, perhaps the most revolutionary tactic we can try isn't filling out another questionnaire—it's praying more!

Prayer, of course, has a higher function than acquiring self-knowledge. It also elevates our knowledge of God. Whether we're targeting the Christian or secular market, every compelling story grapples with moral questions. Because virtue originates with God, we'll fumble to push our characters toward the right answers without a clear conception of who He is and the redemption He's accomplished through His Son. While Scripture offers us a plethora of insights into God's nature, if we don't (or infrequently) lift our thoughts to Him, our comprehension of His attributes will be deficient.

As famed Anglican bishop J. C. Ryle said in *Do You Pray?*: "A Christian never finds he is a loser, in the long run, by persevering in prayer."⁹

Mistake #2: Treating Prayer Like a Laundry List of Requests

In prayer, we're often markedly attentive to our own wants and needs. So when we begin to include our writing, our first impulse may be to ask for solutions to our immediate problems, such as acing a certain character, recovering from writer's block, or attracting the interest of our preferred publisher.

But when we pray like this, are we really trusting in God and submitting to His will? Or are we hoping to use Him to control our lives?

Sometimes our requests aren't as propitious as our short-sighted human minds assume. If a literary agent had picked up my manuscript a couple years ago, I would have been ecstatic, but in retrospect, I wouldn't have been ready for the pressure. And when I've wanted a shortcut to fleshing out a difficult character, I've later realized that I learned more about human behavior through research and observation.

⁷ Flannery O'Connor, *A Prayer Journal* (New York: Farrar, 2013), 3.

⁸ Timothy Keller, *Prayer* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 18.

⁹ J.C. Ryle, *A Call to Prayer* (Laurel: Audubon Press, 1996), 33.



When we're constantly dumping a six-inch-thick index of petitions on God, we might be missing the point of prayer. The unknown author of this beautiful poem about the Apostle Paul conveys that truth better than I can:

*He asked for strength that he might achieve;
he was made weak that he might obey.
He asked for health that he might do greater things;
he was given infirmity that he might do better things.
He asked for riches that he might be made happy;
he was given poverty that he might be wise.*

*He asked for power that he might have the praise of men;
he was given weakness that he might feel the need of God.
He asked for all things that he might enjoy life;
he was given life that he might enjoy all things.
He has received nothing that he asked for, but all that he hoped for.
His prayer is answered.¹⁰*

What if an ongoing conversation with God is more fulfilling than an instant yes? I'm not implying that He doesn't care about our desires, or that laying them in His hands is unbiblical. But when we approach Him like a loved one and pour out our deepest fears, biggest dreams, and daily ups and downs, we may discover what we truly need, not just what we want.

Maybe, instead of getting published as quickly as possible, you need to focus on studying story craft before you have a slew of readers watching and critiquing your every move. Maybe, instead of perfectly executing an idea from the outset, you need to grow through the practice of identifying and repairing the plot holes so that your next project, the one that will most affect readers, is phenomenal.

Communion with God reminds us that His ways are greater than ours, and all of the blessings we receive while in His presence are far superior to any favors we might wish for.

Mistake #3: Viewing God as a Helper Instead of a Source

If I'm being honest, sometimes I activate prayer like a "final boost" when I'm nearing the end of a writing endeavor. Those thought patterns (if slightly exaggerated) go something like this: *Sure, God can teach me how to depict human beings, the crowning jewel of His creation. But I can figure out most of the complexities myself. I just need Him to fill in the gaps. And sure, I need His help to catch an agent's attention. But if I can whip up a zinger premise and build a solid platform, I'll be halfway there.*

¹⁰ Qtd. in Donald Bloesch, *The Struggle of Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 3.



On paper, the above assertions sound pretty silly, even arrogant. But how often do we subconsciously deflect the credit for our abilities and achievements onto ourselves?

As our Christian Storytellers Manifesto states, imagination is “a gift from God” that He benevolently directs. Even when we don’t reach out to Him during the writing process, we’re still relying on His strength. He doesn’t intervene at the last second and add finishing touches that transform our manuscripts from meh to amazing. He’s involved in every jot and tittle, from the plot to the characters to the prose, and in every stage, from brainstorming to writing to editing to querying.

Do we praise Him for *all* of that, or only the parts that we deem especially significant?

When we acknowledge God as the fountain of our creativity, we better glorify Him and stay humble. And when we recognize how much our writing cup overflows, our gratitude, and thus our happiness, will overflow as well.

Encouragement for Weary Sinners

Discussions on prayer can leave us feeling guilty about our failures to be as devout as we could be. But this article isn’t about heaping more burdens onto our backs, and we don’t worship a God who demands that we pray like saints before He begins to bless us like His children. Instead, He urges us to “come unto me, all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Prayer is not a ticket to obtain writing success. It’s a haven alongside the road where we can unload our burdens, run into God’s embrace, and find comfort, peace, and contentment amid a mentally taxing vocation.

When we pray more regularly over our writing, we begin to see that our confidence isn’t tied to winning a contest or our name appearing on a shiny cover. God is changing us through our stories so that someday, maybe tomorrow or maybe five years from now, we can inspire change in others. His works in us and through us are our assurance.



Chapter Three – Stuck Writers Don't Need More Creativity, They Need More Personal Growth

By Martin Detwiler, Staff Writer

For months, you've been facepalming over a character who isn't coming across how you envisioned. All of your beta readers send you similar feedback: "his emotions seem artificial," "I couldn't connect with him," or "his choices don't make sense to me." You've brainstormed and researched all of the details that shape him, such as the cultural tics in his speech, his personality type, and the lie that's influencing him. You've ingested so much material about character arcs that you feel like you could be a professor of the topic by now. So why is he still a stick figure?

Maybe it's not the character who needs further development. Maybe it's the author.

Many of us, by default, partition off our writing growth and our personal growth. One is vocational and the other is spiritual. Although we realize that the two can and do intersect on occasion, we assume that the phenomenon is limited to traits that help us with the *process* (such as patience or courage), not experiences that inform our *craft*. But what if both kinds of growth coexist in the same sphere, each complementing the other?

The most unique element we bring to our writing is *ourselves*—all of the quirks, values, and gifts that make us distinct as God's image-bearers. When we're creatively drained, the problem could be that we're challenging our fictional characters more than we've challenged ourselves. Either we can't empathize with the character's situation, or we haven't discovered the answer to the moral dilemma he's facing.

Before we can give our characters depth and relatability, we need to welcome the sometimes uncomfortable pressure of God's refining hand on us.

To Craft Character Arcs, We Must Live Ours First

All of us are familiar with Jesus's parable about the healthy tree that bears lush fruit and the decaying tree that bears rotten fruit. The gist of its message is that our actions expose the condition of our hearts. But



since most stories feature characters who, over time, learn to prune away lies and bask in the truth, this parable has applications for fiction as well.

We can't produce compelling stories until we've nurtured our imaginations with the purifying water of the Holy Spirit's work in us. Only when a painful encounter with our own waywardness has convicted us to change can we intuit how such a turning point should play out for our characters. And the more akin their struggles are to our own, the more accurate the portrayal will be. We can't be strangers to the stories we're trying to tell.

We need to draw connections between ourselves and our characters, as *NYT* best-selling author Tosca Lee did while drafting her novel *Iscariot*. In her keynote for our Authentic Characters Summit, she recounted how much trouble she had placing herself inside Judas's perspective, even after extensively investigating the setting and the factors that led to his traitorous decisions.¹¹ But then she noticed how he projected his expectations for the Messiah onto Jesus, who of course did not match the Jews' ideal of a conquering, rescuing king. Tosca recognized a similar attitude in herself: she wanted God to conform to her own preconceived notions about how He'd reveal Himself to her. Moreover, she realized that humanity as a whole has a tendency to carve God into their own image, and discarding those misconceptions is the only path to true faith.

Until Tosca stared into the mirror and saw herself in Judas, she was attempting to depict someone fundamentally different from her, which is difficult, if not impossible, to pull off effectively. But once she bonded with him through a shared flaw, she could vicariously wrestle that flaw through him and help readers to sympathize with an intensely despised biblical figure.

As we write stories that stretch us, we need to be watchful for moments of insight that link us to our characters. When we can enter each scene and explore it ourselves, we'll take readers on a journey so visceral that their own arcs might shift in a more positive direction during it.

To Live Out Our Character Arcs, We Need to Act, Not Just Believe

Before we can find parallels between our lives and our characters' lives, we need to be engaged in a pattern of growth. That may go without saying. But how, specifically, do we cultivate habits that support a continual upward climb?

¹¹ Tosca Lee, "Portraying the Full Human Experience," (April 24, 2020), Story Embers, <https://storyembers.org/authentic-characters-summit>.



Our first instinct is probably to delve deeper into Scripture—and that’s definitely where our roots should be. The resolution of the Christian Storytellers Manifesto that we’re currently focusing on exhorts us “to bury ourselves in Scripture, for we can only exemplify truth when we are immersed in it ourselves.” This paints a vivid image of Bible study, cross references, memorization, and meditation. We can also enrich our takeaways by listening to expository teachers, analyzing the ideas of influential philosophers throughout history (both Christian and secular), and opening ourselves up to vulnerable conversations about sin and grace with friends.

We risk stagnation, however, if that’s where our efforts stop. In Christian circles, sometimes personal growth is misinterpreted as theological acumen instead of exhibited Christlikeness.

Our vision for truth-immersion ought to be much broader, bridging the gap between agreeing that we should forgive those who hurt us and actually letting go of grudges. Between understanding that Christ can redeem us and having existential confidence about where we’ll spend eternity. And between being aware of our faults and striving to correct our behavior.

Knowledge won’t change us—not to the core—until we begin a grueling, lifelong trek of pushing ourselves beyond our flesh-driven nature. At moments, we may shrink back from the edge of growth because the unknown is genuinely frightening. When we deconstruct lies, the ground beneath us crumbles, and we tumble into a valley that we must walk through before we’re made anew. This is sanctification, the removal of dross and the death of what is dead in us.

Thankfully, we don’t have to flounder in the dark. Truth is our illuminator, bringing order and transformation to the chaos of falsehoods and depravity. When we center ourselves around its light, we become marked by integrity—wholeness inside and outside—and morph into agents of change in our world, just like our fictional characters do in theirs.

Do We Need to Be Spiritual Experts First?

After all the emphasis on growth, we may be tempted to judge ourselves as unqualified to write anyone else’s character arc when we haven’t yet completed our own. But since we’ll never achieve perfection this side of heaven, that would restrict us from using our God-given talents. Additionally, such a conclusion overlooks the effect storytelling has on us.

When we venture into uncharted territory with our characters, settings, or themes, we’re forced to seek out truths that will cut through the fog. And as we grapple with up-close and personal issues through the



heart and mind of another human being, we'll see nuances that hadn't occurred to us before and expand the range of our experiences, generating connections with more and more people.

Writing exploratively contradicts the popular motto "write what you know." That's because the one-liner is flawed. A story isn't merely a reflection of who we were when we typed page one, because the act of writing itself teaches us more about God's reality. So instead of boxing our imaginations in, we should set out to write what we *don't know* and then tell the story we *learn*.

Dedicated to Growth

As we create various casts of vibrant characters and endeavor to synthesize our own arcs with theirs, we need to be constantly and consciously reaching for higher ground. Growth is not automatic—it must happen on purpose. We represent this in our stories by throwing our characters into turmoil that shakes them into better versions of themselves. Since we don't always have the benefit of topsy-turvy circumstances to awaken us, we must patiently coax the truth into every corner of our lives. Transformation isn't an overnight miracle but a sequence of small improvements that accumulate day by day.

Whether we grow through hardship or intentional strain, every character arc we outline will, by necessity, contain a thread of us. Our task is to ensure that the thread is strong enough to pull us, our characters, and our readers toward meaningful change.



Chapter Four – Suffering Writers Don't Need More Optimism, They Need More Opportunities to Strengthen Others

By Lori Scott, Staff Writer

The strongest metal is forged in fire. After removing a segment of steel from the flames, a blacksmith shapes and hammers it into a long, flat rod. Next, he alternates between warming and cooling his creation as he sands and dips it in oil to harden it. To relax any remaining brittleness, he reheats it one last time, then sharpens it with a whetstone. The repeated pounding early on ensures that the blade won't bend or break under pressure, and the final refinement transforms it into a formidable weapon that can withstand any foe.

As writers, words are our swords and pain is the process that tempers those instruments. Death, divorce, disease, job loss—with the crises we face mounting on a daily basis, we may sink into an egocentric realm of despair where we can't write, can't ideate. But through these stressful circumstances, God challenges and molds us. And when we endure, we can mine our experiences to commiserate with hurting readers.

The Power of Vulnerability

Years ago, I lost a child to miscarriage. Struggling to cope, I turned, as I often do, to storytelling. As my questions and my tears streamed onto the page, a strange thing happened. I found clarity. Faith and hope revived. And, most wonderfully of all, God wrapped me in His peace.

Later, I met a woman at a conference. Although she was polite and kind, her eyes held sadness. So I asked if something was weighing on her, which prompted this total stranger to open up about her own miscarriage. Coincidence? I think not. We talked, prayed, and hugged. When we exchanged goodbyes, I sent my story draft with her, and she thanked me for the comfort it brought her.

When we've gone through a specific hardship, our portrayal of it will be deeper and more nuanced. Readers will sense that we understand, making them feel less alone. Exploring heartache together helps us heal.



Of course, sharing raw memories, even when couched in a story, requires a degree of vulnerability that can be intimidating. After all, we must relive the pain to pour it out in story format. For example, J.R.R. Tolkien's personal relationships and military service inspired many of the characters and events in *Lord of the Rings*. And in *Where the Red Fern Grows*, Wilson Rawls drew heavily on his childhood. These long-beloved classics show that brave writers are the most memorable.

We can gather the courage to pierce the gloom too if we remember that God is our sustainer and compassion is our motivation.

1. Be Spirit Led

In Isaiah 55:11, God declares that His Word will not return void. Every syllable brims with purpose. When we let God's Spirit guide us, we're striving for the same results. During prayer, we have the opportunity to measure our sorrows in the light of His grace and request wisdom for how to approach delicate topics. Then we can plunge those hard-earned lessons into our stories.

"I ask the Lord to make me a vessel of honor, not dishonor," says author Marie Sontag. "I ask Him to continually cleanse me, to write in the power of the Spirit, and to make me useful in my writing, prepared for every good work. That continues to be my prayer for myself and my writing friends."¹²

Author J.A. Marx echoes the sentiment: "Ask God to fill you with His love for your target audience. Remind yourself that you are His instrument."¹³

2. Be Empathetic

My daughter once told me, "I've always carried the weight of the world. But with you, at least I know I don't have to carry it alone." Readers are looking for a burden-sharing companion among the characters they meet in a story. Anger, doubt, and depression isolate us—until we see those negative emotions mirrored in someone else. Then a connection forms. As fiction writers, we pull readers out of that place of misery and into the embrace of empathy.

Author Heather Kauffman's novel *Loving Isaac*, though exhausting to write, allowed her to reach her audience with a poignant message: "I have a brother with autism. We grew up in the military, so we went to quite a few churches over the years. Some were welcoming, loving, and warm. Others, unfortunately,

¹² Marie Sontag in discussion with the author, October 2021.

¹³ J.A. Marx in discussion with the author, October 2021.



were the opposite. I wrote about this in novel form to gently show the needs and emotions of special needs families in the church.”¹⁴

My upcoming young adult novel, tentatively titled *Inside the Ten-Foot Line*, focuses on a high-school volleyball player. I tapped into my own athletic aspirations to depict the protagonist’s drive to succeed and her deep-seated frustration when her dreams seem unattainable. Layering those pieces of myself onto her made her problems and growth accessible to readers.

Julie Marx offers an ingenious tip for identifying with readers: “Cut out a picture of someone that represents your target audience and pray for them. Keep the image near your workspace as a reminder of who you’re trying to touch with your words.”¹⁵

3. Be Real

To have an impact, we must create worlds, situations, and characters that resonate with our audience. But the echo starts with us—it’s our emotions and experiences that lend authenticity to the scenes we write, and replaying unpleasant flashbacks to extract a truth is no easy task.

In Marie Sontag’s book, *The Bronze Dagger*, Sam’s adoptive dad encourages him to forgive his abusive father, explaining that it does not mean excusing someone’s behavior or pretending nothing happened. It means moving on and choosing not to seek revenge. Marie traveled back to her childhood to flesh out this conversation: “I had to reflect on the pain I experienced growing up in a dysfunctional home. By allowing myself to relive a few incidents, I was able to write the scene in a powerful and authentic way.”¹⁶

As distressing as revisiting a troubling moment might be, it enables us to write in a believable manner. We’ll recognize the sounds, sights, and sensations that should be present. If we sob, laugh, or fume while writing it, readers probably will too. And if we’re unfazed, readers won’t have much of a reaction either.

4. Be Hopeful

As Christian writers, we’re called to spread hope, and unless we learn to push past our own inner turmoil so that our characters can too, readers may leave with heavier hearts than before. Hope transports us beyond crushing emotions and gives us a solid foundation to cling to. Although we need to represent life’s rough edges, including a glimpse of hope is equally important.

¹⁴ Heather Kauffman in conversation with the author, October 2021.

¹⁵ Julie Marx in conversation with the author, October 2021.

¹⁶ Sontag.



The death of Billy's dogs in *Where the Red Fern Grows* is gut-wrenching (I cry every time), but the author doesn't strand readers in grief. When Billy returns to the gravesite to reminisce about his adventures with his pets, we realize that the sun didn't stop rising each morning and that beauty still exists if we search for it. His tranquility becomes ours.

I recently drafted a middle-grade story where I based the protagonist on a friend whose parents died of cancer while he was still in high school. The tragedy made an indelible mark on me, and because of the issues I've noticed people dealing with on social media, I felt compelled to convert it into a story. Yet, even as I immersed myself in the character's anguish, a ray of light kept cutting through. My short story "Cages," which also revolves around loss, contains the same stubborn hope even though I didn't necessarily plan it.

I believe this continues to happen because Christ cannot be held back no matter how dark or long the night is. He shines through the low points of our stories, illuminating the path out.

5. Be Intentional

Christian writers tend to view their work as a mission. Whether we're trying to provide an engaging, wholesome story, stir readers to action, or express our faith, we want our words to make a difference. And when we write about characters overcoming difficulties and insecurities, readers will follow them upward.

"Writing fiction forces you to get in the head of your characters," Kauffman says. "I had to get in the heads of the very people who had said hurtful things to my family. In looking past my own pain, I saw the situation in a new light and experienced healing in a way I hadn't before."¹⁷ She passed that revelation on to her audience in *Loving Isaac*, and reviews indicate an increased awareness of the prejudices that families with autistic children deal with.

When All Is Said and Done... Be YOU

All of the rigorous pounding and intense fire gives a sword durability. Likewise, painful experiences equip us with an arsenal of ways to handle human emotions. When we bring that iron strength into the hearts of our characters, we help readers to cope with difficult emotions in the comfortable, safe arena of a fictional world.

Words can make readers cry or laugh. Spark rebellion or offer peace. Crush or heal. We can lose and find ourselves in words. Words communicate the innermost parts of our souls. Words touch wounds doctors can't reach.

¹⁷ Kauffman.



Why do you think Christ used parables? His words, skillfully woven into a relatable narrative, enabled Him to convey meaningful and memorable messages to His audience.

Look at your own life. What hard-earned lesson can you share with readers? How can you offer hope and encouragement? Your words have power. Like a sword, wield them wisely.



Chapter Five – Insecure Writers Don't Need More Reassurance, They Need More Surrender

By Gabrielle Pollack, Staff Writer

If no one's ever told you, you're a liar. And you're allowed to be proud of it.

As storytellers, we're engaged in a ministry that's centered around imaginary realities. We carve out mythic spaces and beckon readers to enter in the hopes that they'll gain a better understanding of themselves, their world, and God's purpose for them.

We're masters at weaving beautiful lies, but not at ignoring ugly ones. Every day, fear whispers that our stories are meaningless, doubt shrieks that we're terrible writers, and despair taunts us with the notion that God couldn't possibly have called us to create. We have no choice but to listen—we can't plug our ears when the voices come from inside. So how can we mute the noise?

The last portion of the CSM resolution we're currently studying states that “we can only exemplify truth when we are immersed in it ourselves.”¹⁸ Usually we interpret this as advice about themes, but the principle also applies to our mindset about our own value as writers. We'll struggle to craft stories that free readers from misbeliefs if we don't counter the three deceptive thoughts dragging *us* down first.

Lie #1: You're a Fake (AKA Imposter Syndrome)

The first of these lies is common, because everyone wrestles with it at one point or another. When friends or family members compliment your writing, imposter syndrome peers over your shoulder and scoffs that they're just being nice. Once you're out of earshot, they'll start snickering at your melodramatic scenes and stiff dialogue. Imposter syndrome loves to creep in after critiques, rejections, and during moments when you can't see the results yet. Over time, it warps your perception of your skills.

When you let your nerves take over, you'll avoid showing your writing to anyone and edit obsessively, strangling your creativity in an attempt to be so perfect that no one will ever respond negatively. If your

¹⁸ Christian Storytellers Manifesto.



writing isn't five-star material, you're worthless. If you're not a professional by now, you'll never succeed. And the self-abuse goes on.

Imposter syndrome sets a whole shipping container of lies onto your desk for you to unpack. And to deal with all the baggage, you need box cutters of truth.

For starters, your writing probably isn't as awful as you assume it is. You overestimate your ineptitude because you are your own worst critic. But trying to kill this lie by judging the quality of your writing is like trying to defeat a hydra by chopping off its head. The more persistently you validate yourself through the condition of your writing, the more you'll believe that you only matter if you write well.

This fix is our default because American society preaches that our level of success raises or lowers others' opinions of us. We're addicted to the measurable. But the American concept of worth is not God's, because the blandness or brilliance of our writing doesn't dictate how deserving of love we are. We could sit in chairs and eat ice cream for the rest of our lives and Jesus would continue to treasure us. Although His plans involve more than ice cream consumption, it's still a revolutionary fact.

Objectively assessing your writing is important. You need feedback and edits to gauge when you're ready to publish. But where your identity is concerned, you need to rely on a much loftier source: whether you can't spell anything correctly or you're a bestseller, it won't change how your Creator cradles you.

Lie #2: Your Project Will Fail

This lie is quieter. It hovers in the background until you're choosing a premise to work on or an agent to pitch to before politely reminding you that your idea has a massive chance of flopping. Does it bring statistics to prove that prediction? No, but it's so subtle that you hear it without realizing that the words sank in.

Outward signs soon begin to appear, though. You hesitate to commit to a single project. Instead, you jump between different stories in case your current one doesn't pan out. You can't find time to write. Inspiration fades, and you lose the will to tap out words.

You may be tempted to yell, "No, I won't fail. So there!" and suffocate the lie with a pillow. After all, the odds of your project crashing *and* burning is too fatalistic to be 100 percent accurate.



Although this is a semi-effective tactic, it's not the sharpest stone in your sling. Your definition of failure is directly tied to your definition of success, and reshaping the latter will not only hush the lie but also transform your writing process from stressful toil to a labor of joy.

For example, if you want to sell a hundred copies of your debut novel during launch week, that's an admirable goal. But treating it as your *only* benchmark leaves you at risk of disappointment. Your story's merit resides in the lessons it teaches you about your craft and God's reality, not the number of buyers. Storytelling binds you to a community of caring, vibrant people who share your passions. Better yet, it's a form of worship, of exercising the creativity that God threaded into your DNA long before you saw your first sunrise. Even if your story never ends up in another person's hands, writing it with an ear to the heavens makes every word count for eternity.

Lie #3: You're Not Called to Be a Writer

This lie is touchy, because it's not always untrue. Not everyone should pursue an author career. But the theory of a calling is mystified in creative circles to the point of harm. If we can't discern whether we're honoring God or not, our motivation will shrivel. Serving and glorifying Him is our core mission. Otherwise, we're writing alone.

This lie affects your writing habits similarly to imposter syndrome. You procrastinate and never fit writing into your schedule. You tiptoe around, feeling guilty when you address dark topics. Your concern about your calling is commendable—you're seeking God's approval above all else—but prolonged indecision strains the spirit.

I can't confirm that you belong in the writing field, but I do know that we tend to question our callings out of fear. If we don't follow the pattern God has (apparently secretly) laid out for us, we're sure He'll shun us until we figure out what we're supposed to be doing. If this is our perspective, we'll be too scared to receive any answers He may give when we ask for guidance. We must remember that, even if we wander down the wrong path, His grace is sufficient. He won't abandon us in the middle of the road. It seems counterintuitive, but we need the confidence to make mistakes.

Another reason that Christian writers search for a "more noble" calling is because they worry that fiction doesn't fill any needs. It doesn't solve wars or poverty or famines. And, especially if the audience is small, few people will read the stories. What if we're just hurling pretty words into the void and impacting no one?

This past year, I volunteered at a therapeutic boarding school, and my job involved building relationships with teenagers. Some were receptive. Others had a hard time opening up due to their troubled pasts. Only



then did this less-than-socially-savvy introvert realize that being both an authority and a friend is a challenging line to walk, and I spent the entire summer tripping over it.

But guess who the students *did* bond with? Fictional characters. At any moment during the day, I'd stumble upon a handful of students reading intently. Why? Because books offer empathy, comfort, and enjoyment. Books don't boss them around, judge them, or interrogate them. Books invite them into an experience and nestle into a corner of their hearts that might take someone like me half a year to find.

Storytelling matters. Although the results are up to God, fiction has the unique ability to connect deeply with people you'll never meet.

In the end, calling isn't all it's chalked up to be. Your life comprises a thousand tiny yet pivotal events. You're a writer, but you're also a friend, sibling, child, volunteer, and coworker. Your life does not revolve around *one* task that you have to blindly and desperately grope for, because God designed you to do *everything* for His glory and in His love.

Jot down any other insecurities that are making you skeptical of your calling. Bring them to God, and expect the unexpected, because He never orchestrates circumstances how we think He will. Remember that waiting is okay, but so is acting. Either way, His grace will sustain you.

Fear Is Not Your Enemy

When we discover these little liars inside our heads, our first instinct is to attack them. Unfortunately, we're misunderstanding fear's intent—to keep us safe from danger. It's not stopping us because it's spiteful, but to protect us from hurt.

Christ didn't come to beat up those voices, steal their lunch, and label them stupid. He provided a solution instead, a comfort that can relieve the terror when we're hesitant to move forward: "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20b).

Writing is strenuous. And painful. We'll have to surrender it to God over and over and over again. Our fears will overwhelm us on a regular basis. But no matter how often obstacles knock us down, we always have Someone to catch us and lift us back up. We may have to fall a thousand times before we believe it, but He's always within reach.