

The Writer's Identity Crisis

By Colleen Patrick patrick@screentalk.org

*Wad some power the gift to gi'e us
To see ourselves as others see us!*
—Scottish poet Robert Burns

*Ah for wisdom from vision afar
To see ourselves as we really are!*
—SCREENTALK columnist Colleen Patrick

HOW DO I LOOK?

Look in a mirror.

What do you see?

Take a minute to think about it and write a couple of from-the-gut responses.

Chances are you're probably seeing yourself in positive and negative terms. Like pillow face, chubby cheeks, receding hairline, nice nose, need a shave, good teeth/smile, ratty shirt, and things of that sort.

The exterior is only one part of our identity—how *we* want to appear to *others*. Interestingly, our appearance is generally prescribed by the way we believe *others* want to see *us*. Whether we actually do look like they want to see us is the speculation of Robert Burns.

My belief is that if we know ourselves from the inside, we can have more appreciation of who we are—our unique insights and distinctive points of view—becoming more expressive and creatively free. This in turn allows us to form an individual exterior that enhances our artistic liberation **and** is ultimately appreciated by others.

Since a lot of our self-image is based on feedback from others, we most frequently fashion our appearance in order to fit in with the people giving us the feedback (or peer pressure) or to avoid attention, rather than creating our own unique style. The risk of ostracism or belittling is too great.

How much of your identity—what percentage—is based on your outer surface is entirely up to you. What percentage do you give appearances in the big picture of your identity?

What sets artists apart is a peculiar kind of courage. It takes nothing short of enormous balls and ovaries to express ourselves in whatever art we pursue.

We must have the guts to forge our own self-image; to make self-approval more important than the endorsement of others

who actually want to manipulate and control you to be someone other than who you are.

Imagine how much courage it takes to look exactly like you want to, dress in what gives you pleasure, cut your hair in a way that you love with a color you love? Even if it means wearing a white shirt, tie and jacket amidst a group that dresses ultra casually!

k.d. lang, the popular Canadian vocalist, found herself in the buzz saw of controversy by dressing and appearing just as she wanted to see herself, others be damned. Because her look is based on honesty—who she really is—it has brought her an avid fan base.

SO WHO ARE YOU?

If I ask, “Who are you?” How would you describe yourself?

When someone asks you what you do, what's your answer?

Student? Doctor? Computer software programmer, teacher, lawyer, bricklayer, construction worker, restaurant owner?

If a producer or director asks what you do and you respond with a day job title, they might very well say, “Thanks anyway. I don't need an office manager for my project—I need a writer.”

It would have been fine to say you're a writer also working as an office manager.

If your career is already writing, but you don't believe you are the success you set out to be, how do you characterize yourself and your life?

As a writer—no matter how you make your living—how would you describe your personal and professional identity?

If you consider yourself a “barista trying to write,” it sounds like you view yourself as someone attempting to write, but someone who's not actually writing, at least seriously.

How we see ourselves defines how we act and react.

If *you* don't identify yourself as a writer first and foremost, how can *others*?

If you don't see yourself as successful, how can others?

Finding your identity, let alone living it, as any sort of artist can be especially difficult in cultures that seldom recognize artists (unless they are rich and/or famous) as people with a “real” vocation, such as the United States today.

That's why it's crucial to see yourself as a creative artist, no matter how others see you, if you are yearning to become one or to continually improve your craft and to achieve the goals you set for yourself as a writer, actor, painter, director, photographer, or dancer.

When an artistic identity is neither supported nor respected by a culture, it is especially difficult to claim your genuine identity as an artist. Something always feels like it's missing; like an emptiness that cannot be filled by being someone you are not.

Even those who support you may be less than enthusiastic, especially when it comes to the financial assistance every developing creator needs. Although not as shabby in its treatment of artists as the U.S., even nations renowned for their generous support of growing artists have been cutting back funds because of a stressed world economy.

It's extremely important to find a community that champions your aspirations, work and feelings. Somewhere people can support and identify with you—and you with them.

▶ Award-winning® writer-director-producer Colleen Patrick is also a successful camera acting, writing and directing coach in Seattle, Washington. She has written, directed and produced four narrative short films, one of which was an official Academy Award submission in 1997. Former president and international liaison for Women in Film/Seattle, she's currently in development with her feature *The Director* and writing a book based upon her successful coaching techniques. For more information, check out <www.colleenpatrick.com>.



Not just because of what they do, but who they are.

SCREENTALK <www.screentalk.org>, and WORDPLAY<www.wordplayer.com>, along with other online groups and magazine communities are vital. You're a member of a community that works hard for the care and development of creative artists.

I belong to two private professional online writing groups, and with one in particular, it's more than a supportive community—the members feel like family. We've suffered and celebrated births, deaths, divorces, depression, script sales, dinks, contest winners and oh, so much more. And of course we help one another with any writing questions and dilemmas.

FACING THE TRUTH

Are you someone who discounts your writing? Diminishing its importance in your heart, your life? Are you afraid to face the truth of your **real** passion?

How do you expect other people to recognize your worth as a writer if you don't?

Without seeing yourself as a "real" writer and believing you are a genuinely writer, manifesting those dreams of becoming a pro—especially a pro who makes a living exclusively from writing—will be difficult, if not impossible.

When people, who are not yet making their living as an actor, writer or director come to me for coaching, they usually start with the idea that they're not "really" whatever vocation for which they seek coaching. They say that sometimes even if they've had a lot of experience and been paid for their work! Say, what?

They don't tell anyone about their training or that they are "actors," etc. They want to keep it to themselves until they've actually "produced" something or appeared in something whose title you'll recognize.

It's fine not to tell friends and family, unless you know exactly how they'll respond and are ready for the reaction.

But **not** seeing themselves as actors, writers or directors is a serious problem.

My coaching sessions are not classes, they're professional experiences. In other words, they are already doing the very thing for which they seek coaching in our encounters—writing, acting, or directing!

Here's what they ask:

"Since I'm not making a living from it, how can I call myself a writer?" they ask.

Here's what I tell them:

"How's this? Call yourself a 'writer in training.' That should feel like you're telling the whole truth. Does it?"

"Absolutely!"

"Well, here's the deal," I add. "When you're making your living as a writer 40 years from now, after you've received a dozen awards, several honorary degrees and worldwide respect, you will *still* and *forever* be a writer in training—at least, if you're any good."

Aha! The lights go on!

Writers write.

Professional writers make money—but often not enough to rely entirely on their writing wages.

"Real" writers write with or without an income from their literary labors.

But if you don't consider yourself—see yourself—identify yourself *and have the self image* of a writer, chances are you will always "want" to be a writer without ever actually becoming one.

WHICH COMES FIRST?

You know that age-old riddle, which came first, the chicken or the egg?

I've always thought the chicken came first, because the egg needs a chicken to warm it until it comes out of the shell, after which the adult chicken must protect the helpless baby until it gets some feathers and learns how to survive—from the adult chicken.

So, I reason that if you see yourself as a writer first, then do all it takes to become the best writer you can, you're on your way.

Read how others have done it; watch biographical interviews and programs that outline the career of people whose work you respect. Not to try the same thing, but to pick up ideas about how you can plan your trek through the steps to learn what you must to create your own career.

Here's something else I recommend: Writing part of a script you adore, word for word. Type it out—maybe just a couple pages. Then do another, and another.

Trust me, you'll **never** be able to write like William Goldman. Or Jane Campion, even if you re-typed every one of their scripts.

Everyone is so much an individual, because you don't have the background or thought pattern or education of either writer, it can't happen.

Stay with me on this—

It's like being an orange.

See, oranges—all the billions of them in the world—appear to look the same.

Truthfully, every single one of them is different in some major physical, flavorful, scent-sual or minuscule way.

You can learn from these artists by tapping your keys a mile in their scripts, so to speak.

This exercise can give you a feeling of how someone brilliantly uses and merges vocabulary, story structure, dialogue, surprising plot turns and subtext on the page.

It helps you use the wisdom of these great

writers to devise your own unique style—of story telling, language use and possibly even format.

YOU ARE A CHARACTER

Do you define yourself as a writer in training, no matter the stature of your work? If you have, you can confidently write like *you* because your self-image is that of a writer.

As for appearance—dress the way you believe a writer dresses—especially when you're writing! A little too often, my "uniform" is a nightshirt, robe and slippers.

As for behavior, act the way you need in order to become the best writer you can. I personally don't drink, smoke or do drugs. I'm pretty heavily into sugar however, which I intend to change with my New Year's resolutions.

The writers I know who drink to excess and/or abuse drugs ultimately sabotage their careers unless they get help and stop.

And here's how to really understand who you are:

Make yourself a character.

I define my characters by the way they react to everything.

My belief is that "the way we deal with fear defines who we are," because that is perhaps the most influential emotion we have.

When fear at any level strikes, what do you do? Lie? Run? Take a stand? Remain silent? Speak up? Strike out?

One partner incapable of dealing with his or her fear causes domestic abuse assaults and murders. The abuser moves on to the secondary emotion of anger and acts out on it instead of dealing with what's really transpiring internally—because they're *too afraid* to deal with their feelings.

How do you react to good news? Boredom? Pain? Stress? Envy (another form of fear)? Love? Intimacy? Challenges? Beauty? Compliments? Heartbreak? Bad news?

What or who makes your eyes light up when they enter the room? That's a reaction to something that is loved.

Anyway—write about how *you* react to *everything*. That's how you know who you are.

And when you realize who you are by the way you react to everything, you can then choose to change your reactions if you don't like them. Just like your characters.

In fact, that, in the end defines who you or your characters are—whether they have the guts to not only change the world, but to change the toughest challenge in the world—themselves.

The beauty of being a writer—being who we actually are—is that we can do it forever. We never stop.

Writers don't retire.

We de-compose. ■