

The
Writing
Warrior

DISCOVERING THE COURAGE
TO FREE YOUR TRUE VOICE

Laraine Herring



TRUMPETER

Boston & London

2010

Trumpeter Books
An imprint of Shambhala Publications, Inc.
Horticultural Hall
300 Massachusetts Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02115
www.shambhala.com

© 2010 by Laraine Herring

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Printed in the United States of America

⊗ This edition is printed on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standards Institute Z39.48 Standard.

♻️ This book was printed on 30% postconsumer recycled paper. For more information please visit www.shambhala.com.

Distributed in the United States by Random House, Inc., and in Canada by Random House of Canada Ltd

Interior design and composition: Greta D. Sibley & Associates

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Herring, Laraine, 1968–

The writing warrior: discovering the courage to free your true voice / Laraine Herring.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-59030-796-0 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Authorship—Psychological aspects. I. Title.

PN171.P83H475 2010

808'.02019—dc22

2010008804

Direct Experience

You can't have a genuine experience of language
except in language.

—Carole Maso

I worked for a time through the Arizona Artists Roster as a writer-in-residence for grade schools and middle schools. One Friday afternoon in late August, I sat at a too-low table in a too-short chair with four Language Arts teachers at a local grade school. I was scheduled to be their writer-in-residence for the month of October, and we were meeting to discuss what I would be covering in their third, fourth, and fifth grade classes. This was my first residency, created more out of financial need on my part than desire to spread the joys of writing to small children, but I was excited and I wanted to do a good job. The money for one four-week residency was five times better than teaching one adjunct creative writing class at the local community college. Even I could do that math. We were waiting on one of the teachers who was still outside on bus duty. These teachers were sweet people. I could see their passion for children and how much they wanted to provide a good experience for their students. One teacher, a petite, bird-like woman with funky red reading

glasses opened up her folder and asked, “What approaches are you going to use for the Six Traits of Writing?”

The other polite teachers waited for my answer, as if I’d just been asked something as simple as whether I wanted cream or sugar with my coffee. I felt the scrambling in my brain as I searched for that answer. But the overriding question in my head was: *what the heck are the Six Traits of Writing?* I had a BA in English and creative writing and an MFA in fiction writing. I’d been teaching community college creative writing classes for several years, and I’d already had two books published. I had absolutely no idea what the Six Traits of Writing were. Apparently, I didn’t get that memo. Oh my gosh, what did third graders know about writing that I didn’t? This was clearly not going to be as smooth as I’d anticipated.

Because these women were sweet, or perhaps because they were used to dealing with long silences following their questions, the red-eyeglassed woman quickly produced a handout in 36-point font. OK, great. Now I’d be able to answer her questions. I had no doubt whatsoever that I was capable of teaching writing. There must be some new buzzwords flying about.

The handout only made it worse.

6 TRAITS + 1

Idea/Content

Organization

Word Choice

Sentence Fluency

Voice

Conventions

Presentation

“These traits are the qualities of writing,” said the eye-glassed one.

Really? Uh oh. I hadn’t thought I’d be found out so quickly. I knew in my heart of hearts that I’d somehow skated through graduate school with people much more talented than I, and that I’d scammed my way into a teaching position because I have excellent people skills. But I always thought I’d be undone by the PhD sitting in my creative writing class, proving once and for all to me and the whole class that I actually hadn’t ever read a single one of Hemingway’s books all the way through. Instead, I was going to be defrocked by the third graders of Phoenix, Arizona.

Whenever content fails me, I fall back on people skills. “Well, I thought we’d spend time actually writing.”

They nodded in unison. I wanted to cross my legs, but it was impossible in the child-sized chairs. I kept going.

“I thought if we wrote and then talked about what we wrote, it’d be fun. And educational,” I added quickly.

One of the women made notes in perfect script.

“Can you give us a list of your activities and how they connect to the Arizona State Language Arts Standards?”

The what? What happened to the writing part? “Sure. I’ll e-mail it tonight.”

They seemed momentarily satisfied. The bird-like woman held suspicions, I could tell, but she kept quiet. No doubt something in her background had taught her that artists were somehow different and should be given a wide berth before drastic measures had to be taken.

As we sat together, the mishmash of color in the third grade classroom was comforting. Bright yellow suns against cobalt blue skies. Rainbows. Pictures of funny cats and monkeys. Gold stars. It had been over thirty years since I was in the third grade, but not too much seemed different. Except

for this Six Traits thing. That was new. How had I managed to write anything without this essential knowledge?

The meeting concluded well enough. I received my classroom schedule and got a tour of the school (follow the yellow footprints for the third grade hall, the green footprints for the fourth grade hall, and the blue footprints for the fifth grade hall). I couldn't be sure these sweet women weren't wishing they'd picked another artist—maybe the cute one with the long hair who plays drums and makes a lot of noise, then asks the kids to make finger paintings of the drum rhythms—but they'd already given me the check, so we were on for October no matter what.

Once I got home, it didn't take long to find the Arizona State Language Arts Standards online. Finding them, however, did nothing to ease my concern over actually talking about them. Who wrote these things? Who came up with some kind of rubric for what writing is? More important, how is this kind of theoretical discussion even possible, especially with children? It was going to require my most sophisticated sleight of hand to pull off this gig.

I spent an inordinate amount of time worrying about the first day of my residency. I tried to memorize the Six Traits, but they wouldn't stick. I had to keep fighting the urge to sneeze “bull\$*&%” in my hand. I was continuously reminded of my favorite Jean Cocteau quote: “An artist cannot speak about his art any more than a plant can discuss horticulture.” Was the school system assuming that writing was an external thing? That if you built the skeleton the heart would just move on in?

I tried to remember third grade. I tried to remember how I had been taught to write, but I couldn't come up with anything. We read a lot in school. We memorized poems and parts of stories. We wrote a lot and had to keep journals. I

remembered learning about organization and grammar, but grammar was something separate; it was a way of understanding what had been written, but it wasn't *writing*. What had happened? I thought about graduate school. Did we ever have seminars on how to write? None that I could recall. Did we ever come together and agree on what constitutes good writing? No. In fact, we had lively debates over what worked and what didn't in fiction and poetry. The conclusion ultimately being there was no conclusion. Literature has a big tent. Where would Gertrude Stein fall under *conventions* in the Six Traits system? Where would Virginia Woolf fall under *organization* or Don DeLillo under *sentence fluency*? How would Samuel Beckett deal with *ideas and content*?

While I did understand that the Six Traits system helped give the students some vocabulary for discussing writing, and I did understand that the traits, with the notable exception of voice, were all easily marked right or wrong, which made grading papers significantly easier, I also recognized that this attempt to place a rigid container around what makes good writing would create a problem for students later on. Teaching students they can learn how to write by breaking writing down into manageable chunks, to be mastered bit by bit, isn't going to work.

I know this: one cannot dissect something before it's been alive. The same is true with writing. Neither the Six Traits nor any rule-based view of writing take into account what really makes a piece of writing speak. Maybe we can arm our students with comma and semicolon rules, and maybe we can instill a healthy respect for some form of organization, but ultimately, like any warrior worth his or her salt, we know we have to send them out into their own jungles, their own swamps and seas, and see who's capable of bringing back an original catch.

As the old spiritual song says of the lonesome valley, “No one can go there for you.” This is true of your work as writers. No one can write for you. No one can share your direct experience of writing. Sure, you can commiserate with fellow writers, but everyone’s experience will be different. Each writer navigates her lonesome valley differently. And it’s in the valley, not in the dos and don’ts of syntax, where writers get lost. While theory can help you find new ways of looking at problems and activities, and help you think more critically about your own choices and reactions, what matters most is your direct experience: what you feel and hear when you listen inward. Your own feelings and transformations provide the baseline for your practical path.

Pay attention to yourself and to your patterns. Don’t let yourself get in your own way. Be vigilant and compassionate. Be in the writing, not around it. Not under it. Not beside it. Be in it. Let the words you’re writing and the feelings you’re experiencing while writing wrap around you. Please don’t trick yourself into believing that reading about writing and thinking about writing is the same as writing. You know in your heart of hearts that isn’t true. As a Writing Warrior, your commitment is to the truth—to seeing things as they are, not as you wish them to be. From that place, you will stand in power and authenticity.

Disconnection

I confused things with their names: that is belief.

—Jean-Paul Sartre

It's going to happen. You're going to be going full throttle for a week, or a month, or a year, and then—bam! You'll find yourself wondering what on earth you were thinking. You won't recognize your story. Your characters will stop talking to you. You'll realize you started the whole book in the wrong point of view, or the wrong setting, or with the wrong character. You'll sit in front of your computer where previously you've been in blissful harmony with the work, and you'll do nothing. You'll raise your fingers above the keys, pause dramatically in hopes something brilliant will swoop in underneath your fingertips and start writing again, but nothing will happen. You'll suddenly read the *World's Most Brilliant Book Just Like the One You're Writing* and go order three gallons of Chunky Monkey ice cream to wash it all away. You'll realize that the vampire stories you've been working on diligently for several years are now passé. You'll look to heaven or hell or anywhere in between to find your missing muse. You'll consult old books that once held pearls of wisdom on the writing process only to find them all stu-

pid and irrelevant. You'll walk into your favorite bookstore where you've always found comfort only to see instead a glut of books that no one is buying.

This phase of disconnection hits every writer. Don't make the mistake of taking this phase as the end. Think about it instead like the teenager phase of your book. Remember how fun your kids were when they were teens? Or, if you're not a parent, remember how fun you were as a teen? Yeah. It's coming back to you now, right? The rolling of the eyes. The slamming of the doors. The cries of *no one understands me*. The inability to talk with your mother or father without fighting or crying. The feeling that no one anywhere in the universe has ever been so alone. So different. So strange. So unable to fit into the world you've landed in (not by your own choice, you might add).

Disconnection from your work is not the same as the limbo phase. Limbo is that time between projects when you're not sure where to go next. Disconnection applies to the current project you're working on. You may feel bored with it. You may find yourself vulnerable to seductions from brighter, shinier projects. In short, you and your work don't know how to talk to each other anymore. Where's the writing counselor?

Your book is just going through some growing pains. Its job is to fight with you. To challenge you. To resist the path you've laid out for it. Its job is to wrestle itself free from you so it can find its own voice. Your job during this time is to keep showing up. Remain present. Don't decide you don't love the work anymore. Don't decide to send it off to boarding school. Don't force it to wear a navy blue uniform or take out its piercings. Don't do what every fiber of your being is telling you to do—hold tighter; don't let it get away! No. Stop yourself. Back away. Keep your door open. Keep food in the refrigerator. Don't cut off the bank accounts. This is a critical

time in your relationship with your writing. This is the time many a talented writer collapses under the stress of watching what she has loved rebel. It doesn't have to be this way. Patience. Compassion. Kindness. Space. We are cultivating all these qualities with our breathing, shaking, and writing practice.

Don't throw up your hands and walk away. Your work wants to talk to you; it just doesn't know how yet. It needs to find its own identity and then return to you. If you close the door, it can't come back. Keep showing up. Perhaps focus more time now on journaling or prewriting for a different project, but check in every day on this novel. Check in every day on its well-being. "Are you still there? Are you OK? Do you want to talk? Can I get you anything?" And if the answer is no, or if no answers surface at all, return to your desk and keep working. Here's where your maturity and practice will pay off. You'll be able to remain steady while your work goes through its own temper tantrums and identity crises. Your steadfastness will show your writing that you will be there no matter what it does or doesn't do. No matter how easily the words come, or how hard it is to find them. Your love is nonjudgmental. Your compassion endless.

Now at the risk of sounding too Pollyannaish, let me assure you I identify with the frustration of these troubled-teen times. I tend to want to force my work to do something it is (or I am) not yet ready for. I want to do it all *now*. But I have to wait. Don't force. Be steady. Your book will come back to you if you keep the door open. If you keep learning your craft. If you keep showing up. Your book will take you to the next level. Your only task when you feel this disconnection is to step back, keep working, and release your attachment to an outcome. Release your desire for a particular result or a timeline for a particular result.

You're not going to get very far with your daughter if you keep pushing to know her every secret. If you keep following her around on her first dates. If you keep telling her what college program to major in. You're going to create tension and friction between you and your work. You're the writer. Your job is to hold the space. You remain rooted while your work bounces around for a while. You hold the space. There is freedom there.

Don't let yourself fall victim to judgment. Don't tell yourself this wouldn't happen if you were a real writer. A good writer. Even a modestly good writer. This wouldn't happen if you'd planned better. If you hadn't taken that new job. If you didn't just get married. If you didn't just get divorced. If you'd thought your plot through better. If you hadn't tried to mimic another writer's voice. If you hadn't read so many James Bond books before starting. If you'd gotten an MFA. If you hadn't gotten an MFA.

Stop.

Breathe.

Shake.

Pay attention.

1. It's normal to be at odds with your book.
2. It's normal to not like your book.
3. It's normal to feel distant from your book.
4. It's normal to doubt your own ability.

Try to remember what drew you to the book in the first place. You're starting to see why writing is work. Yes, it's fun. Yes, it's fabulous. Yes, it sucks. Yes, it's hard. It's many many things. Sometimes all at the same time. Writing a novel is not like working on an assembly line. One part plot, two parts driving question, one part characterization, throw in a dash of dialogue. Voilà. Story. Nope. Not like that.

You're in the beginning stage. You're birthing your book. You have to step back and let it evolve. Your job—and your only job when writing a first draft—is to write the next right word. Stay present in the body and belly of your story. Resist the urge to leap into the future of your story, or to hold on to past ideas about your story. One word follows the next. This is not new information. It's not new advice. One word plus one word plus one word eventually yields seventy thousand words.

A first novel is often just a first novel. It teaches you how to write a book-length work. It is not the book that you will get published. It is often not even very good. It is the book that teaches you how to be a Writing Warrior. It is the work that is necessary to get you where you ultimately can go. No work is ever wasted. I have many first novels. They all taught me valuable things. I thought they were all going to be the “one.” They were not. But they were my companions. And my teachers.

Your job is only to write the next right word.