Say Goodbye to Writer's Block:
Introducing The Moral Premise

Genre: Story Structure

I hate writer's block, and I'm sure you do, too. If you're like most writers you have a file drawer full of stories started but never completed. The ideas were great, or so you thought. They kept you awake far into the night pecking them out. Now, they languish in a drab, beat-up file cabinet— a monolithic grave marker in the dark corner of your office.

What happen -- those hundred times -- brain blocked, locked, and unconsoled?

When I wrote *The Moral Premise* the purpose was not to help rid myself of writer's block. After it was written, however, I started teaching and consulting about what writing the book had taught me — that the moral premise is an ancient law of storytelling that not only affects a story's success at the box office, but also your story's success in your writing office. As I consulted with students and other writers I saw stories sift, lights tricked on, and impregnable blocks were pulverized into a fine, free-flowing sand. I was intrigued by the lights behind those at first dreary eyes that turned brighter as story premises were mined, character arcs took shape, and we discovered what the story was *really about*.

Maybe this was the answer. Over time and many such sessions I've allowed myself a bravado -- that the moral premise is the solution to writers block. I don't say this to build myself up, for surely I did not invent the moral premise, anymore that Newton invented gravity. In fact, it isn't even my theory. Plato writes about the moral premise, as has practically every story guru since then, although they've used a variety of different terms to identify it. Through my research I've concluded that the moral premise is part of natural law. One of those things that belongs inextricable to every successful story that was ever told. If you use it correctly, your chances of the story being accepted by a broader audience increase -- dramatically. If you use it inconsistently, or violate one of its rules of formation, your story is destined to fall far short of its potential.

What is the moral premise? It's quite a simple concept, actually. Perhaps that's the problem. Many of us, when we write, want to create involved complex stories, and we forget that

even in an ensemble piece, successful movies, most novels, and all stage plays, are really about only ONE thing.

You can see the moral premise and the writer's plight in movies like *City Slickers*, where Mitch Robbins (Billy Crystal) is having what you might call life-block. He's not happy with the story of his life. He doesn't know what his story is about. He mopes. He whines. He's selfish. What's wrong? Does he need a new wife, new friends, a new job, a new adventure? His wife tells him to go out West to herd cattle with his friends -- and find his smile.

It is on that journey that Mitch meets Curly (Jack Palance) who counsels Mitch that life is about *one thing*. Moments after Curly's soliloquy, Mitch finds himself delivering a calf from its dying mother. The calf adopts Mitch as it's guardian. Suddenly, Mitch begins to take responsibility for something outside himself. Later, that responsibility grows as he returns from a selfish escape to herd the cattle home and save the calf caught up in a raging river. Mitch's heroic efforts turn on a light. He feels a satisfaction that he'd had lost long ago. He discovers that by focusing outside his self he finds satisfaction and joy. It's significant that *City Slicker* writers, Lowell Ganz & Babaloo Mandel, have Mitch name the calf "Norman" which is a contraction of "Normal Man" -- that is, the calf teaches Mitch what it is to be normal and a man.

Mitch discovers what was always true -- what that one thing is that will make him complete. He discovers the importance of caring for others, the importance of being a father and a husband -- a normal man. He discovers a true moral premise and applies it to his life: *Selfishness leads to sadness and frowns; but selflessness leads to happiness and smiles.*

In that same way *The Moral Premise* is about helping you as a writer to find your smile. It's about discovering what your story is about and how the structure of everything you create — characters, plots, sets, dialogue, action, and camera angles — are all about, can only be about, one thing. Curly was right.

That one thing, however, has two sides, just like a coin. There is the physical side, and there is the psychological side. When we talk about a story's physical side we describe what a movie is <u>about</u>. But when we talk about a story's psychological side, we describe what a movie is <u>really about</u>. That difference cannot be emphasized enough. The physical and the psychological sides of the story are inseparable, like the two sides of a coin.

As a person, you have a physical and a psychological side, and each *effects* and *affects* the other. Your psychological being is dependent on the health and wellbeing of your physical being, and your physical being is dependent on the health and safety of how you think about yourself and your situation. If you physically injury yourself, it brings on sadness if not depression. If someone emotionally wounds your spirit, your body is less motivated and can

become listless, if not sick. In extreme cases physical shock can block your brain, and psychological trauma can paralyze your body. Your physical and psychological beings are inseparable.

The same thing is true of the characters in your story, or should be if you want audiences to react to your characters as real and properly disposed human beings. In *City Slickers* Ed (Bruno Kirby) is trying to cheer Mitch up and convince him that having an adulterous affair would spice up Mitch's life and make him happier. Ed tries to convince Mitch that it's possible to do such a thing in total secrecy and no one would ever know. Ed even suggests that an alien could visit earth, have sex with Mitch and disappear forever. ED: "No one will <u>ever</u> know. You're telling me you wouldn't do it?" Mitch cracks a joke and says: "Look Ed, it wouldn't make it all right just because Barbara didn't know. <u>I'd</u> know. And I wouldn't like myself. That's all." Mitch realized, what Ed didn't, that everything that happens to his character physically affects his character psychologically. Mitch's mental decisions and culpability are inseparable from his bodily actions.

One of the big mistakes some writers make in writing stories is to concentrate on the physical plot, and ignore the reality of what is happening inside their characters. Sometimes writers make the mistake of thinking that physical events come first and only secondarily do such effects affect a character's psyche. But the opposite is true. Everything that happens externally is driven first by internal thoughts; even a character's decision to put himself in a vulnerable situation. Our thoughts are driven by our values. Thus, at their foundation all good stories are about values-in-conflict, that find motivation through thoughts-in-conflict, which morph into bodies-in-conflict. Values come first. Then thoughts. Finally action. It is never any other way, even when a character reacts instinctively. That "instinct" finds its motivation in values and thoughts.

Thus, at its heart and essence, the successful story may be about the physical goal or arc on the surface, but deep down, the story is <u>*really about*</u> the psychological goal or arc. What writers forget is that every -- let me repeat that -- <u>every</u> physical action originates and is motivated first by a psychological emotion or thought.

Think about it. You (and likewise all your characters) will do nothing out of purely physical stimulation that isn't motivated by a deeper psychological need connected to a value. All physical conflict is first a conflict of internal values. As I am typing this I just took a break and massaged one of my fingers. That physical action was predicated upon a mental decision to stop typing and literally scratch the itch. Your character gets out of bed in the morning based on

a mental motivation whether it be the need to eat, get to work, or empty a bladder. The psychological always precedes and motivates the physical.

Therefore, your story is *really* about what is going on mentally, psychologically, and emotionally between your characters. What you write for the director to put on the screen are the physical representations or metaphors of the motivating, true, real story. Movies only have sight and sound to tell stories with. We're not writing novels where we spend page-after-page describing a character's thoughts. We can't show what is going on inside a character's mind, unless we listen to his or her thoughts as we do with the protagonists in *Forest Gump* and *American Beauty*.

In the best movies, that is the most successful ones at the box office, the physical story (or visible element) is a metaphor for the psychological story. In *Interiors*, Woody Allen does a masterful job to metaphor his characters' empty mental state through the set design of the barren rooms they occupy. In *A Beautiful Mind* we see the dysfunctional marriage of a man with a dysfunctional brain. In *Die Hard* John McClain's physical struggle against murderous thieves metaphors his psychological struggle to save his marriage—his love for Holly dies hard. In *The Hurricane* we physically see the result of hate with Rubin Carter's imprisonment and the consequences of sacrificial love with his release. *In the Bedroom* physically demonstrates the killings as the result of jealously and bitterness. *Liar! Liar!* shows us the physical rejection we can experience when we don't tell the truth. *An Officer and a Gentleman* reveals the consequences of dishonest friendships.

When we know what our stories are really about psychologically, we suddenly know what our good guys and bad guys need to do and say. No longer is the story about the fierce battles that freed Scotland from England's repressive rule. Suddenly, we know the story's moral premise: *The willingness of leaders to compromise liberty leads to tyranny; but the willingness of leaders to die for liberty leads to freedom.* It is because of the conflict of values—liberty vs. tyranny—that William Wallace dies. And it is loyalty to Scotland that gives Robert the Bruce the courage to sacrifice all, in order to lead the nobles to true freedom.

The basic form of the moral premise is simple: *Vice leads to defeat; but virtue leads to success.* If we parse out that form, we notice that the first part of each phrase begins with the psychological motivation of the characters or a value, and the second part of each phrase ends with the physical ramifications of pursuing that value. Thus, selfishness (a psychological value) can lead to rejection (a physical consequence); but selflessness (the opposite psychological value) can lead to acceptance (the opposite physical consequence).

When you have a true moral premise, you can apply it to each of your characters to determine their goals, failures, successes, and obstacles. Good movies are about a protagonist who has a goal that is hindered by two cogent obstacles. One obstacle is physical and one is psychological. The physical obstacle is the antagonist who tries to prevent the protagonist from achieving his goal. The antagonist's motivation is an extreme form of one of the moral premise's values. The psychological obstacle is the protagonist's own imperfection or lack of understanding and application of the moral premise's truth.

For example: At the beginning of a movie a protagonist is being a bit selfish in his search for the girl of his dreams. That selfishness is a psychological obstacle to getting the girl because the girl rejects guys that are selfish. Thus, our hero is rejected because he has an internal imperfection that needs to be corrected. The physical obstacles may be created by another guy, who is even more selfish, but perhaps more clever at covering his selfishness up as far as the girl is concerned. Perhaps the antagonist plays tricks on the protagonist and makes him look foolish in front of the girl; and at the same time the antagonist woos the girl with some success, perhaps playing on her selfish ambitions. In this way the antagonist becomes the physical obstacle. The moral premise for such a movie might be: *Selfishness leads to rejection; but selflessness leads to acceptance.*

These two types of obstacles are related by the moral premise. Both stem from selfishness. As our protagonist learns how to be giving, kind and less selfless, (perhaps by watching our clever but even more selfish antagonist), he (the protagonist) changes his thinking and behavior, and in the end defeats the more selfish antagonist and hooks up with his dream. Likewise, the girl at first is attracted to the poor goon who selfishly feeds her natural selfish desires. During the course of our story the girl and the hero learn the truth of the moral premise and adapt it to their lives with success. The antagonist, encounters the moral premise but rejects it. By the end, every main character that embraces selfishness is rejected and those that are selfless are accepted.

In such a way, the moral premise directs the writer's development of each character's arc, their goals, their weaknesses, their obstacles, and the story's resolution -- and the problems associated with writer's block are eliminated.

The moral premise will tell you, the writer, what direction the protagonist and the antagonist have to go to make the story flow. If you think you have a true moral premise and are still experiencing writer's block the problem may be one of two reasons: (1) you are trying to include a scene, an action, or a character that, while interesting, has nothing to do with the one thing of your movie -- the moral premise. (2) The scene is interesting and dramatic, but

refocuses the audience's attention on a different moral premise. In creating a successful story that connects with your audience, each of these problems is like stepping over the third balcony railing at the infamous Sherman Oaks Cineplex and expecting to float in mid air. It might happen in one of your movies, but in your writing such reasons defy the natural law of story telling, and writer's block will result. You'll crash on the marble below. Call it's writer's crash on a block.

My suggestion? Early on, find your moral premise -- and stick to it. I promise, writer's block will be a thing of the past. And your story will float to success.