

The Serendipity Workshop: Lost on the Border at Twilight

By Holly Lisle

Finding – and Using – Your Life's Essential Strangeness

- You mention a friend you haven't heard from in twenty years . . . and three days later you receive an e-mail from that friend.
- Your child tells you who is on the other end of the phone . . . before you pick it up – or even stranger, right before it rings.
- Your car keys vanish, only to reappear an hour later, right where you thought you left them all along.
- Your dead publisher visits you in a dream and through an intermediary, gives you an angle on a story you're writing that fixes the biggest problem you've been having with the story, and makes the conflict a million times better as a side benefit.

We experience all sorts of little oddities in our lives – from *deja vu* to serendipity to bits and pieces of the purely inexplicable, we brush up against the borders of an unknown realm daily. Mostly, we ignore these tiny excursions into weirdness. Or if we don't ignore them, we brush them off with raised eyebrows and a nervous laugh. We prefer the universe we live in to be brightly lit, sensible, secure . . . **comfortable**.

Only no one has ever written a really good book from a position of comfort. If you aren't twitching at least a little, if your material doesn't make you nervous, if you

aren't afraid, you're not doing anything real.

So, in our search for what is real and what is scary, let's take a tour of your life, and all the oddities you've been looking past in order to pretend you always see sunshine in some of those shadowy corners.

But all this stuff is superstitious nonsense, isn't it?

Maybe. Big, definitive "I dunno" here. Some of the synchronistic events that happen in our lives may have some scientific explanations. Spend time reading the "what-it-all-means" sections of books on quantum physics and the simple act of deciding to get out of bed in the morning can start to take on an air of surreal significance. At the quantum level, we may all be connected; may all be resonating at the same rate. We may all be part of something bigger. It won't kill you to read a few books on the subject, just to give yourself the information to form an opinion.

But why these weird events happen in our lives is not actually the point. These things **do** happen. The four examples I gave at the start of this workshop all happened to me.

The trick with finding value in such oddities is to pay attention to them, to notice each event.

And that's where this workshop will start. With observation. A single caveat: If these exercises make you feel uncomfortable . . . well, my first inclination is to say, "Good, you must be onto something," but if you find yourself too uncomfortable, or if participating in part or all of what we'll be exploring will violate religious or personal codes, just give the offending section or sections a miss.

With that out of the way, let's head for the borders of the familiar, for the twilight realm . . . because it's time to get a little lost.

I'll give you three exercises, and at the end of the workshop I'll offer some suggestions on how you can use the data you'll obtain to add something unique to your writing.

Exercise 1:

For this exercise you'll need

- a cheap ring-bound notebook small enough to carry around with you all the time
- a pen, maybe with a light in it so that you can, if necessary, write at night
- persistence, and a spirit of discovery

(But then, if you didn't already have all these things, you wouldn't be a writer.)

Procedure:

1. Keep track of unexpected things that happen during the day. This isn't just limited to big strange things like knowing who's on the phone before you pick it up, but also little strange things – talking with your spouse about an episode of a t. v. show, and having that show air that day, little feelings of deja vu, having little household objects appear or disappear – as you start actually keeping track of the oddities, you'll be startled by how many peculiar things happen to you in a day.

2. But don't stop with things that happen when you're awake. Try remembering your dreams, too. Along with dream events that seem to have some real-world correlations, (and great story ideas, of course), keep an eye open for people. People you know, dead relatives or friends, people you don't know who tell you interesting things. Dreams lie well across the border into the realm of the weird, and they offer up some truly bizarre nuggets.

Do this exercise every day for at least a week. A full month

would be better.

Exercise 2:

You'll need

- a tape recorder
- a friend, or better yet, a fellow writer who is willing to try something a bit odd
- a box of envelopes
- small objects one or both of you have found or brought with you (they have to fit in the envelopes, and all the envelopes have to be the same). Individual car or house keys, rings and necklaces, and photographs all work well for this game.
- your notebook and pen

How to play:

1. Number the front of enough envelopes to give you one for each object. Place the envelopes face down, and shuffle them thoroughly.
2. Place one object into each envelope and seal the envelope, making sure neither of you gets a look at the number of the envelopes the objects go into. It also helps if you can each keep the other from seeing the objects you've contributed.
3. Spread the envelopes out in front of you, numbered sides up. Pick an envelope, and in your notebook, write down the number on it. Then, rest your non-writing hand on the envelope, relax, and while leaving your hand on the envelope, start writing the first things that come to mind. Write down colors, sounds, impressions of places, descriptions of faces – anything you think. When you run down, move to the next envelope, write down the number on it, and repeat the process. Leave as much space beneath each description as you used for the description itself.

4. When each of you has written something for each of the envelopes, start opening them, one at a time. In the space beneath the appropriately numbered entry, write down what the object was. Then each of you read aloud what you wrote about the object, and the person who knows the details of it will point out anything in the description that actually connects with the object itself.

5. Do this exercise at least three or four times over a period of one or two months, preferably with the same partner. Look for any improvements in descriptions, accuracy, connection with objects. Look for specific objects that you routinely do well with. Look for those that you never get any links to at all.

Exercise 3:

For this exercise, you'll need

- an Internet connection
- a cheap spiral-bound notebook
- a pen OR
- a friend who can read tarot cards, palms, or perform some other form of psychic reading (most people have at least one, though they usually don't know it)
- a tape recorder and empty cassette tape (get a 90 or 120 minute one)
- your handy-dandy notebook and pen, of course

If you're going the Internet connection route, you can try this site's Strangeness Tools.

Or cadge a brief reading from the friend – a general reading, nothing where you ask questions. Record the reading, and over the time period specified by your reader, keep track of which things in the reading were on but obvious, which were off, and which really surprise you.

Alternatively, take a bit of time to learn to read cards

yourself. You can look at this from either the Jungian archetypal perspective, wherein all cards will have meaning to you because they play off of deeply embedded archetypes, and your subconscious creates meaningful stories from each of the images drawn; or from the connection-to-magic perspective, wherein you touch the twilight border when shuffling and drawing the cards, and connections to the Other-realm affect those that you draw. Either way, you'll find out some fascinating things about yourself, your characters, your worldbuilding, and more, by learning tarot.

I suggest tarot rather than astrology, psychic reading, or other methods because tarot for the purpose you'll be using it is a simple mechanical skill. You memorize card meanings, you memorize positions they land in, and you figure out odd synchronizations in your story or your characters by reading through the layout you through. It isn't magic. It does occasionally feel like it.

If you decide to go the second route, I can recommend either the book **Learning the Tarot**, by Joan Bunning, which teaches the readily available Universal Waite Tarot deck, or the book **Motherpeace: A Way to the Goddess Through Myth, Art and Tarot**, which teaches the feminist-oriented Motherpeace deck. Most men, and a lot of women, will be more comfortable with the images and approach of the first set.

DON'T waste time or money trying to find a good psychic reader on the Internet, locally, or on the phone. **You aren't looking for an actual psychic reading. You're doing this to get different angles on your fiction.** You're doing this to get background – you can get good background for free.

Putting It All Together

Okay. You've done some tapping along the border, spent a little time feeling lost and uncomfortable.

Now what?

You're going to have come up with a lot of dead ends. Everyone does. But along with all of those dead ends, you'll have discovered a couple of places where you got close to the border – where you and the strange and the unnerving came nose to nose.

Start playing around with the things that you really couldn't explain away. Let's say that you got a tarot reading that just blew your socks off. Or maybe you discovered that you have dreams in which your dead relatives come to talk with you, and when you listen you find out that things they say actually offer answers to your current problems and challenges.

First, ask yourself how you can use these events, just as they are, in a story.

Second, start extrapolating from your starting point. Create a character who dreams of dead people in her sleep because she actually drifts into the realm of the dead – and then have something happen to strand her there, or let her fall in love with someone there, or . . .

Third, take a look at how what you've experienced has changed your world view. Create a universe in which the little oddities you've encountered are more common, more reliable – give a rationale to the force that stands behind them. Then start writing in that universe.

Sit down and brainstorm story ideas that incorporate the things you've uncovered. Head back to the border for more material if you need it. Keep the journal, read more envelopes, keep your hand in with the tarot deck. Get hold of books on the strange and the inexplicable. Yes, they're full of nonsense, but they're also full of fascinating events that can be shifted, twisted and turned until they become novels that have some real bite.

The things that touch us deeply are those that are true. In order to write fantasy well, you need to have a visceral connection with the truth that what we can see in the universe is not the whole of the universe. When you know in your gut that something (no matter how small) exists beyond the realm of human understanding, you'll discover that this realization colors your work and adds a richness and depth to it that you would never have thought possible.

Good luck getting lost. Good luck being uncomfortable. Remember how it feels – because as soon as you've unnerved yourself, you can pass that experience on to your reader in a gut-grabbing tale that he'll never forget.

Now get going. Twilight is coming and the border is waiting.

(reprinted from **Holly Lisle's Vision: A Writer's Resource** Vol. One, Issue 4 – Jul/Aug 2001)

NOTE: I offer a comprehensive introductory class based on my fiction-writing and publishing experience. It's called *How to Write Flash Fiction that Doesn't SUCK*, and it is no-strings-attached FREE, including a private classroom, downloadable lessons, and a friendly, well-moderated forum where you can work with other students. I hope you'll try it out.

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