Say What You Mean

written by Holly
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By Holly Lisle

You want to talk about fear? This is where the process of writing comes right down to sweat under the armpits, racing pulse, dry mouth, and the urge to get up and go to the bathroom, or to switch over from the word processor to Maxis "Space Cadet" for five or ten quick games of pinball, or where the dust on the ceiling suddenly becomes an unbearable affront that you have to get rid of Right Now.

This is where facing anything else becomes preferable to facing the words on the page, because the words on the page are about to get up and bite you on the nose.

You are faced with uncomfortable truth and the urge to pussyfoot around an issue, and you have to decide which way you want to go—be honest, or whitewash. Here's my advice.

Say what you mean.

Ewww. It has all the appeal of picking your nose in public.

Writers live in abject terror of saying what they really mean, of being clearly and absolutely understood, of having no room in which they can back and fill and say, "You aren't seeing that the way I wrote it." They will, under most circumstances, choose to waffle, to squirm, to take the easy way out.

Don't believe me?

Look briefly at a pervasive, now-classic example of writers who, when faced with saying what they meant, chickened out. When Princess Diana died in a car crash, no matter how hard you avoided the news and current events, or how much you detested the sort of celebrity gossip that pervades common

culture, you heard about this. Writers got more lines out of her death than they got out of anything since the assassination of John F. Kennedy. But in all those lines of print, in all those reams of notes read on-air, how many times did you hear or read that Diana 'died?'

Think about this for a second. I heard that she 'passed' and that 'she's left us' and that she's 'gone.' I heard of 'her tragedy' and 'her spirit living on' and a handful of other euphemisms. But for the life of me, I can't recall a single instance, outside of comedians making jokes about the whole thing, where someone said, "She's dead."

Well, death is one of those uncomfortable subjects, because we all know we're going to die, and none of us are too crazy about looking closely at the reality of the matter.

And Diana's death was unnerving.

She was young and rich and pretty and famous and that didn't save her. She went into a wall in a car while not wearing her seat belt and she died, just like poor commoners do, thus proving that nobody gets out of this alive. So you can almost (not quite, but almost) excuse the nervous tap dancing of the writers who took on her death and crapped out.

But not quite. After all, they did crap out. They didn't say what they meant.

Usually it isn't a matter of life or death, though, is it?

Let's say we're talking about you.

You're working on your book, and one of the characters is loosely based on your Aunt Bertie, who besides being fat and obnoxious also happens to be an alcoholic lesbian, and she makes a great character in a book except that you know damn well if she ever reads what you've written, she's going to know you were writing about her, and she's going to be pissed.

And what about the readers who object to your use of the word ‘fat?’ Never mind that Aunt Bertie weighs a bit over four hundred pounds and she does NOT have a glandular problem—you are going to have readers tell you that you shouldn’t have called her ‘fat.’ Differently sized, maybe.

And that lesbian thing—she calls herself a dyke, but when you call her a dyke in the book, you can hear the chainsaws revving up. ‘Dyke’ is a word that you can’t use unless you are one, isn’t it?

So now you have some hard choices to make, and they aren’t life or death, but what you decide is going to determine whether you have a story with meat on its bones or something that won’t offend anybody, but won’t tell any truths, either.

I’m sitting here right now, and my heart is pounding, because I know that what I am going to say is going to anger some of you. And I also know I’m going to say it anyway, because it’s important, and you need to hear it.

You especially need to hear it if you think that ‘differently abled’ is an appropriate synonym for ‘crippled,’ or that ‘appearance-challenged’ is a better use of the English language than ‘ugly.’ Or if you buy into the nonsense that ‘herstory’ is a correct noun for ‘revisionist history where women are the heroes.’

We are not all the same on this planet, folks. We are not actually black or white or red or yellow—we are in fact various shades of brown, and genetically we are closer to each other than a bunch of over-bred Cocker spaniels at an AKC show. But we are not all the same.

We are fat and thin and skinny; we are smart and stupid, geniuses and retards; we are straight and queer and everything in between; we are sick and healthy; we are tall and short; we are moral and immoral, good and evil; we are honest and we are liars.

We come in two sexes, male and female, and no matter what current Women's Studies classes say, women are not inherently better or purer or more noble than men; and no matter what the old guard at the country club says, men are not inherently better or purer or more capable than women. Some women are smarter than some men, some men are smarter than some women, and screwing around with the English language to censor any admission of this fact is not going to change the fact.

Nor is it going to change the fact that Aunt Bertie is fat and stinks of sweat even on cool days, or that she's a rude, self-centered, demanding woman who thinks the world owes her something because she's a lesbian.

She is who she is—a person and an individual. She is not a member of a class, nor is she an archetype or a symbol, and you can't compare her to any other people you know. She is who she is. And if you try to sugar-coat her to keep from offending people who are looking for the chance to be offended, you are going to end up eviscerating everything about her that makes her interesting.

Say what you mean.

Weasel words are for cowards.

They are for people who cannot face up to the fact that life is not fair, and is never going to be fair.

Weasel words are for people who want to tell everyone else what they can and cannot think, on the theory that if these weasel-writers can just control all those evil, smelly thoughts, the world will turn into a peaceful, matriarchial or patriarchial, gentle place where everyone is the same as everyone else—colorless, genderless, sexless, passive, obedient, inoffensive. The theory here is that if you call the turd floating in the toilet bowl 'feces' instead of 'shit', it will not stink.

I’m here to tell you that shit stinks, no matter what you call it, and if you genuinely believe that different words are going to change that fact, you need to have your head examined.

I’m here to tell you that men are different from women, and that those differences are both normal and good. Men are shot full of testosterone, and while that testosterone gives men a push toward aggressiveness, that aggressiveness is the thing that men channel into the creative drives that have given us some of the world’s best architecture and literature and art, and that have created in men a sense of honor and passion and courage.

Women are shot full of estrogen, and while that estrogen push can make us bitchy as hell, it can also be channeled into creative drives that have given us some of the rest of the world’s great literature and art, and have given birth to some great kids and some of the world’s finest next generations. Motherhood is not a crime. Fatherhood is not a crime. Families are good things. Sex is pretty cool, parenthood is vital and—done well—both life-affirming and rewarding. Further, humanity is worth getting to know in the form that it takes. People **as they really are** are fascinating, challenging, diverse, wonderful, awful, amazing, complex, many-faceted, colorful.

Don’t castrate your writing or your characters because you’re afraid to admit this, or afraid to face the nuts that come out of the woodwork when you say what you mean.

We as human beings are great and worth knowing and worth writing about **because** we are all different. That is the beauty of humanity—that we have risen above the inequalities and unfairnesses of life, and gone beyond our own weaknesses and handicaps and fears, and have made our stand based on who we are.

Not who we wished we were, not who the censors from all walks of life demanded that we pretend we were… but **who we are**.

Write the words that tell your story, even if they hurt.

Take a stand, knowing that the only way you are ever going to say something that matters is if you have the guts to say anything in the first place. Walk away from the weasel words, admit that death waits for you at the end of your life, call your character short or fat or skinny or stupid or ugly or perverted.

Tell the truth, even if it leaves you standing naked in front of everyone—clothes don't do anything but hide the truth of what's underneath them.

Say what you mean.

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.

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