

THE MOLECULAR STRUCTURE OF STORY

By Ela Thier, 2006

I once came upon a definition of happiness that I jotted down and hung up in my office:
"Happiness is the overcoming of obstacles towards a desired goal."

This explains why we love stories so much. Fictional characters are those guys out there who are overcoming obstacles towards a desired goal.

Think about the most joyful and meaningful experiences of your life. Sitting on the beach for hours on end? Eating ice cream? Relaxing on the couch and watching TV? I doubt you can remember even five minutes of any of those activities, beyond the fact that you were engaged in them.

The experiences in our lives that we remember and treasure, that define who we are, are those moments in which we struggled until we accomplished something that we had set our minds to. Learning to tie your shoes, figuring out how to read, winning your first kiss, getting accepted to a college, having that talk with your dad that you never thought you'd be able to have, finally telling someone how you feel about them, getting a yellow belt in that karate class, inventing some MacGyver-like contraption that solved a problem, making a film. The experience of setting your mind on accomplishing something, and then struggling until you achieved it, no matter how difficult, is the experience of true joy.

A consumerist society is invested in making us believe that comfort and convenience are the root of all happiness: the fast food, the remote controls, the newest and latest feature in our screenwriting software. (Has that stuff ever made writing screenplays easier...?) It's a culture that drives us towards couch-potatodom while selling us ripped jeans and scratched up guitars (evidently the ones with the scratched-up finish cost more) so that we can at least have the appearance of living active and vital lives while we're laying there being convenienced.

Because we live in a society that is bent on seeing us atrophy, we yearn to watch someone struggle until they achieve. That story, the struggle to achieve something, resonates with all of us because we know that that's the stuff the truly rich life is made of.

For this reason, as it turns out, all stories are the story about the struggle to achieve something.

This is why you should jot this quote down and put it up on your desk where you can easily see it. Now let's replace the word "happiness" with the word "story:"

STORY IS THE OVERCOMING OF OBSTACLES TOWARDS A DESIRED GOAL.

Know that by heart. Next time you write a script where your character pontificates about the meaning of life, or the ills of society, or God knows what, shut them up, give them a goal, and send them off on an obstacle course so we can see them try to achieve it. By the way, the audience doesn't so much care if your character achieves the goal. They just want to see an honest struggle. It's all in the struggle.

Every single page in your script that does not involve the struggle towards a goal, is, for lack of a gentler word: down right boring.

All scenes that work have a specific goal and obstacles. Every script, every Act, every sequence, every scene, every beat involves the overcoming of obstacles towards a desired goal. This can be super obvious, like Spiderman saving his girlfriend as she hangs by a thread from a tower, or super subtle, like Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson in *Lost In Translation*, sitting there next to each other, wanting to be close and not knowing how. She puts her head on his shoulder, and they sit there... how do we be close...? Goal? Absolutely. They're lonely as hell, they want to be close. Obstacles? Up the wazoo: they're both married. To someone else. They're a decade or two apart. They have to figure out how to have a satisfying connection without resorting to sex. Super subtle. Super powerful. There must be a goal. There must be obstacles. Or else it's boring.

It's important to note the difference between conflict (goals + obstacles) and unfortunate events. Unfortunate events are not conflict. They are not obstacles, unless there's a goal that they directly impede. People often make the mistake of piling on some unfortunate events upon their character, thinking that's drama. That's not drama. That too is boring.

For example:

A guy's house burns down. That's an unfortunate event. That's not conflict. There is no goal and obstacles. Your audience is bored. They've seen fire before. Even big fire.

A guy is trying to ensure the survival of his 3-year-old child - in the midst of a burning house. That's a goal. That's an obstacle. Now we care that the house is on fire because it's making the whole keeping-the-kid-alive thing a lot more complicated.

A woman gets splattered with mud by a speeding car as she walks down the street. That's unfortunate. But we don't care. If there's no goal, we simply don't care what happens. We're not invested.

A woman is on her way to interview for her dream job: the gig she's been waiting for and working towards all her life. As she approaches the building, a car drives by and she's splattered with mud head to toe. That's conflict. There's a goal: to get the job. There are obstacles: she now looks like a character from *Night of the Living Dead*.

Now let's raise the stakes and see what happens: A woman must get a job in order to free herself from a violent and abusive husband on whom she's financially dependent. As she crosses the street towards her much-awaited interview, wearing the only suit she owns, a car whizzes by and splatters her with mud. Boy would that upset us!

Stakes are an important part of story fabric. They're part of this molecule we call conflict.

It's also important to note that the main character in your script will have one single, ultimate goal. I strongly advise writers that until you've written at least five scripts, you make this goal a very specific, external goal that will either be met or not met. Whether your character meets the goal should be a simple yes or no question.

Bring Olive to the beauty pageant on time (Little Miss Sunshine)

Save the world from the Green Goblin (Spiderman)

Get your dad to tell you the truth (Big Fish)

Get your share of your father's inheritance (Rainman)

Prepare and host a Thanksgiving meal for your estranged family (Pieces of April)

Find and kill your wife's killer (Memento)

Goals to avoid:

Peace of mind.

Self-respect.

Dad's approval.

To be saved.

Whether or not the goal is met at the end should be measurable: you want to be able to answer it with a yes or a no. He gets the girl or he doesn't get the girl. He kills the goblin or he doesn't. Period. Getting self-respect...? We have no way to measure that. Not all films have a specific, measurable goal, but most of them do. Until you've written five scripts, I strongly suggest committing to one, external, tangible, measurable goal. Incidentally, I'm willing to bet that once you've written five of those, you won't want to go back to the fuzzy, blurry goals because those are not only harder to write and harder to read, they're also less profound because you're missing out on the joy of metaphors which is what the medium of story-telling through pictures and actions is best designed for.

OK. So your character has one ultimate, tangible goal. This goal, incidentally, may change as the plot unfolds. It may even get dropped altogether at the moment of truth, in that final battle when your character dukes it out with her ultimate opponent and has that sudden epiphany where she realizes that her goal was a big mistake and changes her goal 180 degrees. But at any given time, there is always one, identifiable and tangible goal that serves as the foundation of your entire story.

Since, in this particular medium, your character has only 90-120 minutes to achieve this goal, only 20,000 words to make the most important decision of her life as she undergoes a struggle of epic proportions, she needs to be entirely myopic about it. She will spend every sequence, every scene, every beat, with her eyes on the prize.

No meandering scenes where he's hanging out with friends and shooting the breeze, discussing the meaning of life. Unless, of course, he's pretending to shoot the breeze in order to get in with Ziggy who knows the password for the secret club. He'll then pose a veneer of shooting the breeze but we'll know that he's really after that password.

Or perhaps it's a story about a dude so shy and socially inept, that shooting the breeze is a major feat for him and one he must take on if he ever wants to take Jennifer to the prom. In this case, we'll see him try to shoot the breeze as the obstacles pile up: he's shy, scared, his mouth is dry, too timid to interrupt, the other guys are loud motor-mouths, he can't get a word in, they veer into discussing favorite teams and he doesn't even know what sport they're talking about, he has a toothache but tries to hide it so he doesn't look like a sissy, he has really bad gas, his mother shows up with his lunch box, the possible obstacles are endless. In this example, "shooting the breeze" is the overcoming of obstacles towards a desired goal.

Every scene will end when your character either achieves or doesn't achieve her goal.

In every script, at any given time, there will always be one overriding, ultimate goal that will create and inform all the shorter-range goals that will inhabit each sequence, scene and beat.

This experience: the overcoming of obstacles towards a desire goal, is the molecule of which stories are made of.

What goal can you set for yourself this year, this month, this week, today, that will offer you a chance to struggle, to try, to be scared, to do it anyway, to fail, to fall, to get up and try again...? A karate class? A cooking class? A trip to a language school in Mexico? A talk with your dad? Telling your sister you love her? Ten minutes of writing each day?

Let fictional characters model for you what a good life, well lived, is about: the overcoming of obstacles towards a desired goal.

In my writing classes, I ask my students to set their long-term and short-term writing goals. You start with your long-term goals because those are your compass. They keep you moving on the right trajectory. You then set your short-term goals so the long-term plans don't become pipe-dreams. Short-term goals map out the concrete steps forward. Luckily, you have more than 90 minutes to accomplish your goals, you have a life-time. This gives you the time, unlike your fictional characters, to have lots of goals, not just one. It also gives you some time to relax, and heck, maybe even shoot the breeze :

YOUR WRITING GOALS:

For all time:

In 20 years:

In 5 years:

In a year:

This month:

This week:

Today:

Remember that your goals may change. That's OK. But at any given time, you should know what they are.

Word of caution: do not show these goals to anyone who may cast judgement, say something sarcastic and dismissive about it, make fun, offer opinions or “helpful” advice, and all the rest of it. If you share it with anyone at all, it'll be someone who will offer you nothing other than an encouraging word and share their own goals in return.

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