

LIFEWITING BOOTCAMP WEEK TWO

(TRANSCRIPT)

STEVE: Welcome back to the next segment of our little symposium. And we're going to be talking about plot. And as I said in the first segment, plot is nothing more than what a character or a set of characters does in a given life situation. So you have a convenience store robbery and standing in line to buy some eggs is Woody Allen; that scene comes out a particular way and we already can guess the kinds of things that happen in that scene. On the other hand, you could have that same convenience store robbery and standing in line to get some eggs is Clint Eastwood. Same situation, completely different outcome. So, it's the events. And the events have to do with the interaction between the characters, the situation and reveal both the inward structure of the person, their basic nature and reveals how does the Universe respond to us.

Now, in its most basic way, we understand plot from jokes. It's probably the simplest, shortest form of storytelling that there is. And the first time I understood what a joke was, when I really *got* what a joke was, curiously enough, it was a Rodney Dangerfield joke. So, I will do my Rodney Dangerfield impression: 'See if I get any respect at all, yeah, no respect, right. Took my girlfriend to a party last weekend. Ran into her ex-boyfriend, 6 foot 2, blond hair, blue eyes. She said "George, this is Rodney. Rodney, this is goodbye."' That joke works because we know Rodney Dangerfield's persona, it's 'I get no respect'. So the instance he says 'I took my girlfriend to a party' we know that something is going to happen that's going to be bad. Either he's going to lose her or she's going to impugn his cocksmanhood or something, triggering the fear of abandonment...

So, in other words, we identify with the character called Rodney Dangerfield. 'I took my girlfriend to a party' - the tension level begins to rise, something is going to happen. Every human being got lost at the mall, every human being has had their heart broken, every human being has been abandoned, that fear is universal within us. So when we identify with a character, what happens to that character, if the writer and the actor have done their job properly, means something to us. 'Took my girlfriend to a party, ran into her ex-boyfriend, blond hair, blue eyes.' Now, Rodney has got a body like mashed potatoes in a sock and he's just a lump, right? So the tension level gets higher. We know this is not going to end well. 'George, this is Rodney. Rodney, this is goodbye.' In other words, all this is the potential energy. We know it's going to happen, but we think it's going to happen somewhere over here. It happens here - bang! - releasing the energy in a moment in a laugh or, if it's a horror film, in a scream. Build up the tension, hit the person with it from a direction they don't expect, the energy is released in a laugh or scream. Makes sense?

So in simplest form, we've just taken a look at what a plot is. Now, there are a lot of different ways to answer the question 'What is a plot?' and quite often people will say things like 'A plot is, you know, the story has a beginning, middle and an end.' Well, you know, a piece of string has a beginning, middle and an end; that's of limited use. But the simplest way to look at

plot that I also find at all useful would someone wants something and something gets in their way, there's an obstacle. Someone wants something, something gets in their way. If at the very least you don't know who your "someone" is in the story and you don't know what they want and there is no obstacle, you probably have no story. If I want to kiss the little girl next door and she wants to kiss me, that's not a story, it's an event in a larger story. If her father doesn't like me or her boyfriend objects or something like this or she doesn't want to kiss me and I have to try to convince her to or I have to fight a bully because he's angry or have to convince her dad that I'm an okay kid - now, that's a story. Somebody wants something, something gets in their way.

So that's the simplest way of looking at story that I find at all useful. But there are other ways of looking at story that became more practical. In Dwight Swain's book, *Techniques of the Selling Writer*, he suggests that you have **situation, character, objective opponent and disaster**. In, let's say, the James Bond movie *Goldfinger* - old movie, but I'm just kinda showing my age here. Every James Bond movie is the same as every other James Bond movie, except for the Daniel Craig James Bond movies.

Situation: when gold is being smuggled out of England in large quantities.

Character: secret agent 007 James Bond.

Objective: is given the assignment of finding out it's being done, but little does he know that –

Opponent: super industrialist Auric Goldfinger –

Disaster: is smuggling gold to finance his real operation, the destruction of Fort Knox with an atom bomb.

So you start with a small thing, you get your character into it and it turns into something bigger. The gap between what he thinks is going to happen and what's really happening becomes the adjustment that the character has to make. Usually, how much that character has to grow in a story that involves growth. James Bond movies, Tarzan movies, things like that with continuing characters are not about growth, they are about revelation of character, they are about how bad is James Bond, how much can he do this time, how cool is he under pressure, that kind of thing. So, we'll talk about characterization later, but plot is either going to be what causes the character to grow or what reveals the character.

Now, the argument that has been going on for hundreds of years, if not thousands - What's more important? Plot or character? - **is in essence a trick question**. Because, as we've suggested, **plot is nothing more than what a character does in a given situation. And character is revealed only through action**. So they're flipsides to the same coin. There are more complex plot structures. There are plot structures where you have a **character** in a **situation** with a **problem** and their **efforts** to solve the problem are a series of **revelatory increasing failures** leading to a **precipitating event**, making necessary a **solution** followed by a

reward. Unless you have a villain as protagonist, in which case you have a character in a situation with a problem and their efforts to solve the problem are a series of revelatory increasing *successes* leading to a precipitated events, making necessary a failure followed by a punishment. But both of those have structure and they also imply dynamics. So, it's good, we're getting closer to something as useful. But it's also getting very, very complicated.

The very best plot structure that I know of that also has relevance to any piece of writing you can possibly look at and also has relevance to life itself and therefore is very valuable at a level in different ways, is Joseph Campbell model of the hero's journey. And I've been using this for a long time, it's never failed me and it will never fail anybody, it's worked for thousands of years, it will work over the course of your career. Now, one of the things I want to say and I want to be very, very clear about this, I'm going to make very strong suggestions about things. I don't necessarily suggest that you adopt what it is that I'm saying. I suggest that you adopt a way of doing things that you feel as confident about as I feel about the things that I do.

I'm very confident on what it is that I do and you **need** that confidence, because if you're going to try to write something that is of any complication whatsoever, any complexity, it is going to be pushing you. You want to feel that you have the basic skills that you need at the level of unconscious competence.

So, you can either use a very simple plot structure - someone wants something, something gets in their way. Or you can take a plot structure that is more complicated than that, but that every grain in your being already understands because it's actually the pattern of your life. That's what I like, that's what I'm going to show you.

Now, Joseph Campbell was a cultural anthropologist who in the '60s, I believe, wrote a book called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. And what he did, is he did a comparative analysis of writing techniques, storytelling techniques from around the world and he found that no matter where you went, whether you're talking about an Eskimo shaman or an African griot or Broadway writer in New York or a television writer in Los Angeles, or a Celtic Bard, it did not matter, they were all telling basically the same story. And he extracted from that a particular way of describing that he called "the hero's journey". Now, I've slightly modified what it is that he said, to make it more applicable to what it is that we're trying to do.

But basically, what he said is that these stories - you have a **character who's confronted with a challenge**. Initially they either **reject the challenge**, usually because of fear; they are allowed or forced to **accept the challenge**; they set out along the **road of trials** during which they **meet allies and gain powers**; as they move forward, they will have their **initial confrontation with evil in which they are defeated**; that defeat will send them spiraling into **the dark night of the soul** (the dark night of the soul is the moment when it feels like all of your innate capacities are insufficient to complete the task at hand); the way through the dark night of the soul is referred to as the **leap of faith** (the leap of faith is always faith in one of three things: faith in yourself, faith in your companions or faith in a higher power); if you take the leap of faith, if you've made it through the dark night of the soul, if you've gathered your allies and expressed new abilities properly - because, remember, those new abilities, those allies, you have

to bridge the gap between where you start and whatever level you need in order to complete the goal; if you've done your work, if you've accepted the challenge, if you've dealt with your fear, then the next step is you confront evil and you're **victorious and win**; and the last step is the **student becomes the teacher**.

Now, the lovely thing about this is that you can find this, as I said, all over the world, no matter where you go you can find this. You cannot mention a movie, a television episode, a story, a comic book, a play, nothing that does not deal with this. But **it doesn't necessarily deal with all 10 steps**. See, because this here is like the 88 keys of piano, you don't play music by hitting each key in order; you understand what happens, the changes that happen to someone when they hear a particular note and then you strike those notes out of order to create an effect in the mind of the listener. So if you were to hit every step...if you were to organize any body of knowledge, any body of information, into this pattern, 1 through 10, it would be recognized as a story. It would also be thought of as a trivial story, because we have seen this story a thousand times.

Now, in our culture the most famous example of this would be the first *Star Wars* film, because George Lucas was a fan of Joseph Campbell's work and he read *The Hero of a Thousand Faces* before he wrote the first *Star Wars*. So let's take a look at this from that point of view. The hero in the hero's journey in *Star Wars: A New Hope* is Luke Skywalker. Luke Skywalker is confronted with a challenge - 'Come with me, Luke, learn the ways of the Force' - Obi-Wan Kenobi says that to him. Initially he rejects the challenge, because he promised uncle Owen and Aunt Beru he'd work on the moisture evaporators. And then he is allowed or forced to accept the challenge, because Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru are rendered into barbeque by the Storm Troopers, which allows and motivates Luke to go off and do the things he's going to do. So, he accepts the challenge - 'I want to come with you, learn to be a Jedi like my father' - well, hopefully, not exactly like his father, but that's another story. He sets out along the road of trials. So the road of trials is just the things that you do, the directions you go between here in there. You know, he goes Mos Eisley Cantina, that wretched hive of scum and villainy and he goes to Alderaan and he goes to the Death Star - bing-bing-bing-bing - it's the external dynamism.

Along which he meets allies and gains powers. His allies are Obi-Wan Kenobi and Han Solo and Princess Leia and Chewbacca and R2-D2 and C-3PO and so forth and so on. Although if you think about the entire series of 6 movies, stepping back, you realize that even Darth Vader was actually an ally to Luke. And the powers that he gains along, because remember, if we think about the conclusion of *Star Wars* when they're attacking the Death Star, going down the trench, if the farm boy we saw at the beginning of *Star Wars* was dropped into a speeder on the surface of the Death Star, he would be dead within moments. What he has to do is to learn whatever he needs to learn about himself or the world - 'Who am I? What is true?' - to enable him to fulfill his destiny at the end of the film. So the powers that he gains, mastery of the Force, using the lightsaber, learning how to fight one of those TIE fighters, learning how to bring courage up, learning how to be part of the team, learning how to be a leader ultimately - these are all the things that he has to learn, the powers he has to learn. So all the adventures on the road of trials are designed to turn this person into this person or reveal that person.

Or you might have a story that has a down ending where the person does not succeed, they fail. Now, they will rarely fail because they're just not good enough. Very few people will write stories that have those sorts of down endings, except for very short stories. If you ask people to stick around for an hour or two with the movie or a few days or a few weeks with a book and you can read a book about somebody who's given it everything they have and they're just not good enough and die miserably - it's like, you know, that author is more likely to be a one off, you're not likely to come back, because that's cheating. Ideally, your story is going to be a mash between the situation and the capacity of the person through whose eyes you've chosen to tell the story. They at least have to had the capacity, the potential to resolve this. Now, they may fail, they may fail morally or they may not be honest enough or they have some internal failing that keeps them from being able to succeed in which case you have a tragedy; you have somebody that could have been a good person and went the wrong way.

There are not many classic tragedies in the (modern) Western world, but a great example of one is *The Godfather*. Classic tragedy. Michael fails the test. Michael thinks he's a better man than he really is. He loved having power, he thought it was his dad, he admires his dad 'But I'm not like that, I'm a good soldier' and so on. But after he murders those guys to avenge his brother and he goes over to Sicily, what's one of the first thing that Michael does? He intimidates the father of a girl by telling her that she's going to be an orphan if the father doesn't let him have the girl to marry. And, of course, the girl ends up being blown up within 15 minutes after that. If that isn't a clue that this is a man who will abuse his power and the path that he's going to go down. And then you follow those movies and you see how far down he goes and that everything he does to try to protect his family is actually an expression of his ego, his power, he ends up destroying everything that he loves. That's rare and it takes a tremendous amount of skill to do. Most of the time we believe in victory, we believe that people can win if they bring everything to it, that life can have a happy ending.

All right. Allies and powers. He confronts evil and he is defeated. Now, the moment of defeat in Star Wars - and this is like I said, this is art, not science, this is not a calculation thing, so as we start getting in here there is room for other interpretations. I say that the moment of defeat in Star Wars is when Obi-Wan Kenobi is killed. Because Obi-Wan was supposed to be the one who would take Luke from being a boy to a man. This was the person who was supposed to be the father figure, the mentor figure, the shamanic figure - 'Come with me, Luke, learn the ways of the Force'. But Obi-Wan is killed. In a story of emotion, we would then go internally into Luke and see his emotional collapse, the crying, the depression. But because this is a story of *action*, they immediately go to an action scene where the Millennium Falcon is being attacked by little TIE fighters and, you know, Luke has to get out of himself, get into the flow, get in the moment and start fighting back "great shot kid, don't get cocky" and so forth and so on. And this is one of the places where you can see the art of this. You get a slide step there; Luke goes to the rebel base, they meet with the rebels, the Death Star is coming, they get in their ships, they attack the Death Star. All of that is still in this dark night of the soul moment, although there are cycles within cycles. Once again, artistry.

All this failed. Luke's friends and companions are getting blown out of the air one at the time. He has very little left. The Death Star is about to blow up the planet with his friends. Princess Leia with the cinnamon buns on the side of her head is looking very pensive. John William's music is going *boom-boom-boom*, everything is happening right there. Everything is moving so fast that the audience is confused. And if you saw *Star Wars* in the theater when it first came out - we'd never seen effects like this and we'd especially never seen effects like this in combination with drama. What was happening on screen at that moment was literally overwhelming, there was simply too much information coming at us. The audience was petrified, we were totally in the hands of the filmmaker. And in the middle of this - the leap of faith and the line...well, actually, the line is 'Trust your feelings, Luke.' Now, remember I said that it's either trust yourself or trust your companions or trust a higher power.

And if you want to know why George Lucas is a billionaire, I want you to consider the fact that for the first time that I know of the answer to the leap of faith was all three. It was himself because 'the Force flows through you', it was companions because Han Solo dives in out of the sun and saves him, it was a higher power because the Force is this spiritual force that flows through you, obeys your commands, it's all of those things. If you take a look at the overwhelming rapidity and intensity of the images that were coming at the audience at that moment, it was enough to make you feel utterly insignificant. All the sound, battle station the size of a planet, the machinery isn't working, the computer can't function - oh, my God, what is it to be a human being in a world of such monstrosity? Of such hyper technology? It's overwhelming. And in the middle of all of that, a whisper in Luke's ear 'Trust your feelings' - that what it is to be a human being still matters in this Universe. In other words, it goes all the way from 'Who am I? I am a being that is connected to this Universe. It only seems to be impersonal, it's actually alive.' What is true? 'The Universe is a living thing and I am an important part of it.' The ethical structure of the Universe is clear. The entire movie is an argumentation. What's more important? The human heart or the technology created by the mind? Good or evil.

The Death Star is blown up, the student becomes the teacher. Han and Luke are given medals. Medals are symbol that a culture uses to say 'these people's behavior is worthy of emulation, follow these people, follow this example'. A perfect example of the hero's journey.

Now, I ask you: Why is it that no matter where you go in the world you can find the exact same patterns? Not necessarily every piece of it, because there are wonderful short stories. There is a Shirley Jackson short story I can think of where a woman is confronted with the challenge of knocking on a door. She can hear people laughing and singing and having a party behind the door and she cannot accept the challenge. So the entire story bounces right around up in here. You can start a story where the person is in the middle - no problem whatsoever. You can tell a story backwards, you can take these pieces out of order - *Pulp Fiction*. Your artistry with this is up to you. But the reason - if you could organize your information to this pattern - and the reason it works is because this is the pattern of your life. This is what you go through anytime you want to learn to do anything.

If you wanted to ride a bicycle, you'd be **confronted with the challenge** of riding a bicycle and initially you might be afraid 'I don't know if I can do it. What does it take to do it? That's just something the big kids can do.' You **accept the challenge**. You set out on the **road of trials**. You need allies, probably an older brother, sister or mother of father or an uncle or a neighbor who know how to ride a bicycle, who will get you a bicycle. And the powers, you vision, you sense of balance, your sense of courage, your belief in yourself that somewhere inside you is someone who can learn how to ride a bicycle. And you set out and you try and you try and you try. And you try and you fail and you try and you fail. And the on one day you have the worst failure of all, maybe you fall down in the middle of the street, maybe you fall into a rosebush. But it hurts and you are crying and you don't want to get back up there and your parents or your brothers or sisters, whoever, are saying 'Come on, get back and try again'. And you say 'I can't! I can't do it! I just can't! I'll never learn to do this, I'll never be able to do this!' And somebody got to you, somebody said 'You know, you're a tough kid, you can do this, I've seen you learn to do so many different things, I bet that you can learn how to do this too, I bet you can.' **And you begin to believe in yourself**. Or you believe in your companions, you believe 'Mom and dad are watching. My brothers and sisters, they'll be there to catch me. They tell me I can do this. If they tell me I can do this, they haven't lied about other things, I think they can...' Or the higher power thing. 'I don't believe that I can want something with all my heart that I can't have, I can't believe that God would be so cruel or that life is so cruel. I believe that if I'm not strong enough now, I can grow to be strong enough. All these are kids can do it, I believe that there's broken about me, I can learn to do it too. I'm afraid, but I've been afraid about other things and I still learned how to do it, maybe I can do it. Maybe I can do it.' And you tried and you got there 'Look, ma, no hands!' And the next step, you turn around and you taught your little brother or your little sister how to ride a bicycle and when they were scared you comforted them and you said 'I used to be scared too. You can do this.'

Because we go through this pattern every day, because we've gone through this pattern countless thousands of times, because we've gone through this pattern every time we watch a movie, read a book, comic book, lots and lots of jokes, because every television episode, countless, countless thousands of them, you have absorbed this pattern millions of times over the course of your adult life. So, whereas I can't force to take any pattern, if you were to look at this and apply this to what it is that you're trying to accomplish in your work, you would see things, you would begin to apply 'Who is my lead character? What is his challenge? What is she afraid of that makes her want to back away from the challenge? What happens inside that forces her to accept the challenge? Either she gets stronger or the external motivation gets so huge that she cannot stay where she is. What are all the places that this character is going to have to go either externally or internally? Because there are over-structured stories and under-structured stories, stories that have to do with the outer world and stories that have to do with the inner world.

You have *Die Hard* where most of it is on the surface of, you know, terrorists and fighting and blowing stuff up and shooting people or you have *Ordinary People* where Donald Sutherland is a very quiet and apparently passive character who is trying to decide who does he save, his marriage or his son, because he can't save both. And he's just going to watch because he knows his wife hates his son and his son boards on being suicidal. A choice is going to have

to be made and it's going to destroy the family one way or the other. So it can be the big external thing or the deep internal thing. The best stories have the elements of both, of course.

What is the moment of greatest tragedy, of greatest loss? In most movies it takes place about 10 minutes from the end. Most books it takes place when you've got 90% of the way through. Something terrible happens, it feels like everything is falling apart and this is where the characters come to the end of themselves and they must grow or die. They have to change or die. Lose their love, lose their life, whatever. What does the character have to find faith in that they've never found faith in before? Something deeper within themselves? Maybe trusting other people? Love is possible; I need to trust my team; God exists; Nature is kind; the Universe is not evil - whatever it is. What is the victory? And what is the movement to the higher level? The student becomes the teacher? The return to the village with the elixir? It doesn't matter what it is. There is a completion at one level and a movement to the next level. What is that? Or is it - like on a television series, you repeat the same pattern every week, the characters don't change. In a lot of cases what you will have then is a character who does not change, who is interacting with characters who do change. On *Gunsmoke*, for instance - I listen to a lot of radio plays, watching on television - **Matt Dillon doesn't really change very much, but in those episodes he will encounter people who have lives that can change and so he is the unchanging center.** But people are living and dying and falling in love and moving away and moving into Dodge City all around him. So, there's a center without change, but something does change. If you have a story where nothing changes, it's almost by definition, trivial.

So, this is a pattern that will help us to understand. It will also allow you to guide your life as you set out to build a career. Because you're confronted with the challenge of being a writer and you have to deal with the fear that you have that you cannot or you should not, you don't know anybody who's ever done it, whatever it is that's stopping you from doing the work. You have to accept that challenge. You have to set out along the road of trials.

One very good road of trials is a combination of what Robert Heinlein and Ray Bradbury said - that you finish what you write; **you write a story a week or a story every other week, you finish what you write, you put it in the mail, you keep it in the mail until it sells and you don't rewrite except to editorial request. You read ten times as much as you write and you read one level up from whatever it is you're trying to write.** That's a pretty good road of trials. Are you willing to put in 10,000 hours of work? Are you willing to write a million words before you get to the part of yourself where is all an unconscious competence and you can just do it on that level so that you can concentrate on bigger things, thematic things? When you fail, then you spiral into the dark night of the soul, you get rejected or you get your stuff stolen or whatever it is that's going to happen. Do you have enough faith either in yourself or your mentors or whatever gets you going through that? Because this says it's going to happen. Do not doubt that. Life is going to get in the way, your fears are going to get in the way, your weaknesses are going to get in the way, there is no way to avoid it. What's going to happen? And when you win, because you will win if you've taken care of these other steps, will you turn around and share what you know with others? Either in the structures of your stories themselves or by teaching writing?

And if you take a look around, most writers at some point will teach; they'll do it at conventions, they'll do it at community colleges, they'll write articles, they're part of that chain and that is what human beings have done since the beginning - we share. One definition of what it is to be a human being is we are creatures that can pass our information in complex patterns, extra-somatically, so that one generation can learn from the previous generation and no animal that we know of can do that with such exquisite clarity and depth. They can't record what they say, they can't record what they feel, they can't relate things that are not relatively simple. And so, individual human beings are not much smarter than chimpanzees, but we have from generation to generation, to generation, to generation, in some ways positively and in some ways negatively, began to have more and more of an impact on the world, because we pass on what we know. As you learn, either in your writing, in your depth of understanding what is to be a human being or what is the world should continue, should go deeper, deeper into yourself. As you go through this pattern and you start asking yourself how you learned the things that you've learned and you start writing about people who are struggling to learn, what you apply here within yourself will automatically make your writing better. And everything that you write about will deepen your understanding of yourself. So I like this pattern a lot and I hope you will too. Thank you!

Student: What homework should we do for this segment?

Basically, your best assignment with this is take 10 movies that you like or 10 books that you like and just break it down into this pattern. It's purely a matter of practice, practice, practice.

That's all it is. Any of you guys? Questions? Things to deal with now or later? Otherwise we take a 15 minute break and we get started with the next piece.

Spielberg and Cameron studied from the same book?

Well, there's only one story. There are different ways to address it. Yeah, Cameron is a magnificent storyteller, he tells very simple stories when he has a very complex subject. *Avatar* is an insanely complex subject. That have been a science fiction novel, it would have been 800 pages long and filled with all sorts of politics. But instead of that, you take one frame of *Avatar*, how many pages would it take to describe what you're seeing in the screen? That's what movies are. So, I say that he had an insanely complex situation, so he tells a very, very, very simple story, a story that all of us have heard a thousand times 'Oh, it's *Dances with Wolves*, no, it's *Pocahontas*, no it's *Ferngully...*' It's one of ours became one of theirs and does it better than them. How many times have we seen that? It's absolutely primal cheese 'n' crackers stuff with an insanely complex and complicated layers of technology to bring it into being. So, for me, I loved it, I loved having a simple story there, but other people, you know, some didn't.

A picture is worth a thousand words at 24 frames per second. I'm never seeing The Right Stuff. And then I read the book and I was even more impressed with the movie. I mean,

obviously, the book had a lot more depth and a lot more detail, a lot more stuff, but the movie really captured the spirit and the essence of the book better than a lot of films made from books.

Well, adapting a book, what I have heard is that the thing to do is to read the book several times and then to kind of throw the book away. You know, you read the book and you try to take what are the things that stick in your mind, that stick in your heart and then you have to tell the entire thing visually, which means you will probably have to create new things. Because what books excel at is the internal world of characters. What plays excel at is the interaction between human beings. What movies excel at is the interaction between human beings and their environment. So, you know, the changes are fast.

[inaudible. Roughly: "has any movie ever done a book exactly?"]

The closest thing I ever saw was Alistair MacLean's *Where Eagles Dare*. It's almost exactly like the book, almost exactly. Not exactly-exactly, but so close it was like 'oh, yeah'. I found out years later he'd written it as a screenplay first.