

SB: ...I'm writing a book called *The Dead List*, a sequel to a novel I wrote years ago, called the *Kundalini Equation*. And it was extraordinarily challenging because of the fact that when I wrote the *Kundalini Equation* I was guessing, and now I've experienced some of the things that I was playing around about in there. I'm in a different place in my life, a different place in my career; I have different levels of optimism and pessimism about things – I'm not the same kid. And so, it's been difficult for me to try to do right by the person that I was. And I have a character in that book, who in my first proto-draft was pretty much unrelievedly evil. But she was based upon a real person, at least partially; I wound some things together. I had an opportunity to meet a lady who is arguably the most powerful woman I've ever met in terms of her energetic. Extraordinary woman marital artist, I had a chance to play with her about four weeks ago and it's like touching hands with the goddess of death. And I had seen her at an African Martial Arts conference about 5 years ago in Detroit. And I'd been blown away by her energy, it's like – I never seen anything quite like her before. And the other guys that were there either discounted her or were afraid of her. It was very clear that they were. And my attitude was just 'Wow! What a woman!'. And I got her to talk to me over the phone about what created you? How did you become this thing? And she said that her first husband had beaten her almost to death, and she had walked to the emergency room, bleeding out of her tear ducts. And there had been considerable brain trauma, and she developed a split personality – literally. Just, her personality just fractured, she was just destroyed. And one of those personalities went out and became a goddess of death. Became so deadly that if no one else is going to protect me and my children, I will do it. And it's almost as if one part of her died and she summoned unto herself – she's ridden by the Loa. She basically invited a goddess to possess her, for all practical purposes.

And the understanding – coz people don't practice the martial arts for the same reason that they practice table tennis; they just don't. And the women I've known who've been not mixed-martial arts jocks sort of thing, but went into a different place about this stuff. Universally, what I've seen is they were hurt. They were hurt badly, coz somebody violated, from my perspective, a deal that men and women made a quarter million years ago. Basically, women are going to pretend to be softer and weaker than they are; men are going to pretend to be braver and stronger than they are, and it works in terms of producing maximum grandchildren. But if either side breaks the deal, there's a real problem involved here, because it's a game. Well, somebody broke that deal with her completely, and society broke it. And I looked at the character, the character I created in my book and I realized 'Oh my God! She did not, as a little girl, grow up wanting to be – this is not what she wanted to be! She doesn't want to be this person'. I've brought her to this place in her life. I don't think I can leave her in the pit of hell. I have to have a spark, a possibility of redemption; something I want to give her, even if it's the last moment of her life. An opportunity to see. Because the idea that if you can repent, and you can repent fully even if it's with your dying breath, you found your way.

I love my characters. Some of them, marauders. But when it comes to this first, fully-fledged villain that's a woman, and I'm not sure I've ever done that before in my work. I guess I loved her too much to have her just be completely destroyed by what life had done to her. I don't think, I couldn't do that quite – but that's my view of the universe. That's my view of what we are as human beings. Your work will have to express yours.

TD: Yeah, I don't know how Stephen King – spoiler! – did what he did at the end of *Cujo*. Okay? I don't know – or even the *Dead Zone*, frankly. I was sobbing in my workplace

bathroom when I finished the Dead Zone because I was so in love with that character and I was like ‘What?’ So yeah, it’s hard.

SB: Or Pet Cemetery. Which he didn’t want to publish. He threw it away. His wife pulled it out of the trash. It was too much. So anyway, are we ready to go? Are you rolling?

M: We’re going.

S: How long have you been going?

M: About 5 minutes.

SB: Oh, okay. That’s cool. Good, good. Coz, you know, what I was just talking about, might very well be useful. I was realizing as I was going into it that that’s not necessarily something I want to hold back from people. So, this segment we’re going to talk about – I used to think that stories were just plot and character, okay? And I met Tananarive and she suggested that there was a third aspect that we should add to that, and that is poetics. And I would like to turn this over to her and we’ll talk about other things. But tell me why were you so insistent upon that?

TD: Well, there are great stories and there are great characters. But when we look at the work that really holds up over time, the work that is taught doesn’t always have more legitimacy than the things that are not taught. But the use of language, the great stylists in literature really sometimes stand head and shoulders and we might not have the grasp of language that some of those masters have, but we don’t have to. I want to make a distinction that adhering to a philosophy that says every word should be well-chosen, should be the right word does not mean that you exhaust your thesaurus, finding words you never used in your own speech to try to make it sound flowery. This is something I tell my clients and students all the time. This doesn’t sound like you. Who are you trying to be when you’re writing this? That’s not what I mean. It’s just finding the right words that fit either you’re a narrator, that are not the easy choice. The broadest choice to find the precise language. And when you think of the great stylists, you know, Joyce – James Joyce and William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, Junot Diaz – he’s very casual in his use of language. His characters speak in a very conversational way, yet he’s considered a great stylist in his use of language.

So, beautiful language, I think, or well-chosen language will so enrich the world and characters in your story at every turn – a phrase. Okay, that was bad. I don’t mean that you become authorly, and please don’t try to put on clothes that don’t fit you. It’s hard enough to be a writer without feeling like you’re trying to be someone else while you’re being a writer. But don’t take shortcuts around the right word. Find it each time, in each sentence, filling each page and that interaction between the language and plot and character really do make the work that much greater. So I have some examples I want to talk about, you know. For instance, let’s say thematically – I’m going to use an example from a novel I mentioned earlier, which is Joplin’s Ghost. The story basically, the ghost of Scott Joplin is haunting the house. He interacts with this R&B singer. This is just from the opening page, but just by way of quick background. He died in a mental asylum after years of being nearly destitute, he was buried in a pauper’s coffin. Insane from the effects of syphilis which in and of itself would be terrible, a terrible way to die pre-

treatment. And having the years feeling unappreciated and thwarted because of his race. He wanted to be an opera composer. And as a ragtime composer, just to put it in context – we might think ragtime is a great, classic music now but during that era it was basically like being a gangster rapper. It was the music of brothels. Literally they would have a hole in the wall and the pianist would play according to what's going on sometimes in the bedroom. So it wasn't a great launching place for an opera composer. And I give you all of this background because I want you to see how I wanted to use language and point of view to build the world and theme of the novel from the opening pages. I tried to write the passages with sharp detail and in the details themselves, hopefully create a sense of poetry. And when I'm talking about poetry, again, it's not whipping open the thesaurus. It's just trying to be as precise as possible. So this is one of the opening lines:

'Scott Joplin gazed around the room where the streaked windows invited in an awful, dead winter sun that stole more than it gave. Institutional wooden chairs circled the scuffed old table that offered two checker boards, but not checkers beside a gramophone with a working motor, but no needle to play the cylinders. A sobbing younger man sat cross-legged on the floor, the nest of his privates in plain view from a hollow in his thin, urine-stained gown. Why would Freddie rest him away from his beautiful setting to bring him back to this lunatics meeting hall?'

Now, there are a lot of things I'm trying to accomplish in those sentences. I wanted to show his frame of mind, it's his point of view as a character. As I've discussed in the characterization point of view section, he's not going to notice the pretty parts in the room. I'm sure there were some pretty things in there. But as a point of view character, he's only noticing that there are no checkers and the urine stain and hollow – and all that sort of things. And trying to just use the most precise language possible to paint the picture and hopefully bring the scene to life. Zora Neal Hurston is also a great stylist. Those of you who've read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, this is how she opens that story, so you can see how she uses language:

'Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some, they come in with the tide. For others, they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing. Until the watcher turns his eyes away in resignation; his dreams mocked to death by time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth; then they act and do things accordingly.'

And that's how she sort of opens that novel, and I know as a reader that the first time I read that I was like 'Oh, okay!' I never read Zora, I knew she was very popular. But I thought of her I guess sort of more of a folksier writer, which is fine. I wasn't expecting that language, I mean from the first line. 'Ships in a distance have every man's wish on board' was kind of a lofty sentence.

SB: I want to talk a little bit about poetics. And what we're trying to accomplish there. How often do you listen to – ever listen to books on tape and suddenly you realize that you went into a little side-fantasy and you missed the last two minutes of the thing, you have to back it up? That phenomenon is going on every single time, with every single one. I'm going to ask the camera to follow me over to the whiteboard, coz I want to talk about something called Trans Derivational Search. It's part of what is going on.

So, character, plot, poetics. There's an expression that poetry is what happens between the words. Jazz is what happens between the notes. All words are based upon shared reference. So ultimately you could deconstruct the language until any individual word means nothing. And

so, there's a certain amount of trust that exists between any two people who are talking. Because you're always assuming that they're actually trying to communicate as opposed to use words very carefully to conceal information. What writers, the frustration writers have is knowing the words ultimately have no meanings. But they're all that we have. So what is it that we can do with them? And this is I think where my understanding of poetics comes in. If I give you a sentence, if I say 'The' – so we have the article there. Is that a definite article? Okay, definite article. The. We're talking about something. 'The man'. Okay, so now we've got a noun and we're starting to build a picture, we're starting to have an idea that okay, the article is dealing with a particular male human being. 'The man ran'. Oh, okay. So now we have an action; we have a verb here. So this person, it's not just a bunch of people, it's a singular, is in action. 'The man ran along the street.' Or, let's say, we make it, to give you a better picture 'ran after'. Oh, okay. So does that mean he's either running after something, or after he did something, he then ran. 'After the' – another definite article 'dog'. Now we've got a real picture in our minds. In order to decode this little six-word sentence, every time you got a word, your mind went somewhere. Compared these words to every other word you ever heard, every other image that you've ever been given to try to create meaning. In-between every word, every phrase, every image, your brain did what's called a trans derivational search. You are attempting to find meaning, okay?

Poetry is what happens between the words. A poet chooses their words exquisitely, carefully. Not just for the denotative meaning, the dictionary meaning, but also the connotation. The sound. The way it feels. A lot of poetry is designed to be read out loud. How does it roll on your tongue? How does it hit your ear, as opposed to your eye? What writers are dealing with is not just the text, but the subtext. We have a combination of trans derivational searches that are going on down here to create meaning, emotional meaning. This is crucially important in a book. It's even more important if you're writing visual images. If you're writing for the screen, the screenplays are primarily a series of images. Each image will trigger an emotion, will send the reader or the audience into a cascade of all other things they have seen in life. All the other movies they have seen. In the exact the same way that composers do callbacks to other music that you have heard.

The individual words can be deconstructed until they mean nothing at all, but they're all we have. So literary books will generally be aimed at people who love reading. Who've read thousands and thousands of books. And they will do callbacks to other books as part of the overall experience. These books are designed to be read in a web of other books. As opposed to typical, popular books; airport books that are basically the story. We're going to move forward with the story. But even then, the symbols that are being used, life and death, and sex and love, and all these things are calling back to other images we've seen or images that we have in our lives. So this is why, to a certain degree, once we give you the basics that you need to have mastery of – once you have something basic, then you get it to the level of unconscious competence so you can create under pressure. You must read. You must read a gigantic amount. You must read at least 10 words for every word that you're writing. Because the ability to do this, and to do this effectively, where Tananarive was leading you to feel in her work, that is not conscious stuff. Our conscious minds are tiny little teacups in comparison to the ocean. But if you read vast amounts, you will pick this up. And if what you're looking for is how did the writer achieve this effect, why do I feel this way? After you've read the book the first time, go back and look at it again. Tear apart the paragraph, the sentence – was it the words? Was it the order of the words? Why did I have that emotion?

In order to get what it is that she's saying (and Tananarive's just frankly better at this aspect of what writing is than I am) so I definitely want to use her examples from her work. This, the use of the words and the selection of the words and the images, I want you to pay attention to what she's gonna say about these things. So I just – this is what I see is going on in poetry and in music. Anything where the surface isn't enough.

TD: What I love about that sentence, as simple as it is, is that it sort of plays against expectation. Because, at least in my experience it's the dog chasing the man, you know? So the man ran after the dog is sort of an intriguing notion. Okay, what's going on there? Did the dog do something? In any case, you can use a language, especially in the opening of a story; let's say – because one of the biggest challenges we face as writers is how to fold all these great ideas we have about the plot and where this is going into those very few words in an intriguing opening. As Hurston does in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I often try to use a-ha moments in my openings. I'm giving away secrets here. Through phrasing, very early in the story to create a sense of suspense and hint at the plot elements to come. And again, I cannot say this enough, poetic writing does not have to be complex or flowery writing. It should feel like a voice that comes naturally to you – the biggest requirement is precision. As an example in the most simple language possible, from my first novel *The Between*; the opening line is: 'Hilton was seven when his grandmother died, and it was a bad time. But it was worse when she died again.'

So, I've had a lot of writers tell me 'Wow! As soon as I read that I had to know what's going on here'. The simplest possible language because I was adhering not strictly, but pretty strictly to a child's point of view in my prologue. It's semi-omission, but mostly the kid, Hilton, point of view. The second sentence is not only jarring, I think because of the concept of the sentence having a second death, but because it's more truncated, it's an abrupt, it's like a hammer blow at the end, you know? It's unexpected and pretty sharp.

SB: Unexpected. Any given story has a certain amount of gun powder in it. If you tamp it down into a little tube and set it off, you've got a firecracker – Bang! If you stretch it out to far, it just goes 'fffs'. Remember we talked about the Rodney Dangerfield joke? George, this is Rodney. Rodney, this is goodbye. Read those two sentences again, T.

TD: Hilton was seven when his grandmother died, and it was a bad time. But it was worse when she died again.

SB: She's setting you up.

TD: And a lot of editing, by the way, is chopping off the end of sentences or chopping out the last two sentences in your paragraph. Or often, the last sentence in your paragraph. Try to end on a powerful word; a word that – I've had, yeah, usually that last phrase after the comma, if you have a comma and you've added 3-4 words after that comma, you usually don't need those words. We had the point of your sentence, that punch of your sentence, you're burying it with the extra language. Pair it down, end on powerful words – it works in comedy. It works in suspense. And I have the reader's attention now with that sentence. And I continue conveying more of the details of this life, but rather than listing information – and we often do this – it comes across as journalistic now. Who is this kid? What's his life like? So now I have to talk about him. And this

is where we're doing the laundry list. And it can sound like a laundry list. So this is how I try to establish both his voice and the story, continuing:

'Hilton called her Nana, but her real name was Eunice Kelly. She raised Hilton by herself in rural Florida, in Bellglade which was 40 miles from Palm Beach's rich white folks who live like characters in a storybook. They shared a two-room house, with a rusty tin roof on a road named for Frederick Douglas.'

Now, again, there are no words there that we don't know, that you have to look up in a dictionary. I'm trying to recreate sort of a child's voice and also, it's like tiny little choices. I could've said they lived on Frederick Douglas Road or Frederick Douglas Lane. By saying 'on a road named for Frederick Douglas' I'm creating sort of a sense of loftiness to that idea. The pride, really, in that street name that would be lost with a very subtle shift of the phrasing. And that's what you're looking for. And usually this part comes last in the editing process. Now, Steve and I have completely opposite processes when we write. Steve writes rough all the way through and then goes back and polishes several times. I cannot move on to Chapter 2 or even sometimes page 2 until I have buffed and shined page 1 or chapter 1 until I feel like that baby's ready to go. Okay, so that's one of our interesting challenges in collaborating is having a completely opposite process.

So he wants the story out. He's out in the story, he sees it beginning to end, by the time he finishes his passes, it's there. But for some reason, I have to have a road name for Frederick Douglas, rather than Frederick Douglas Road before I go on to the next paragraph. That's just the way I write. In my novel, *The Good House*, which is a haunted house – demonic possession sort of story, I use kind of playful, casual language to create a sense of foreboding in chapter 1:

'Angela Tussant's 4<sup>th</sup> of July party began well enough, but no one would remember that because of the way it would end. That's what everyone will talk about later – the way it ended.'

And again, I'm just trying to hook you in, okay? Because now you're gonna get a whole lot of backstory, I'm getting dressed for the party kind of scenes and I want to keep you rooted because you know somethings about to happen. Sort of a camp fire storyteller voice which is slightly different than the voice that was in *The Between*, and certainly very different from Scott Joplin's voice in *Joplin's Ghost*. In a later paragraph I'm trying to use very careful word choices to add an ominous note to a very mundane activity. She's getting dressed, she has a t-shirt over her head, her husband touches her. This is how I write that:

'Two clamp-like hands encircled Angela's waist from behind. She froze, alarmed, unable to see because she was trapped inside the cotton shirt. Her arms snared above her head.'

Okay, she's touching her – that's not exciting. You're changing into a shirt and someone touches you, I use the words 'clamp-like', 'trapped' and 'snared' because I'm trying to send you forward in the story with a tenner of what's to come. It's going to be suspense, it's going to be scary, and I'm also showing you this character's frame of mind. She's nervous around her husband – that's one of her character traits. Then her son, she would've probably intuited that and had a very different reaction. So that's just an example – little tweaks. I might've had a previous draft where I didn't mention a clamp or a snare or any of that. But this is how I polished the language to try to keep you strung along, basically so that you'll keep reading the story.

SB: How many of you have gotten up, 2 o'clock in the morning, drinking a glass of water. While you're drinking it, you turn on the television, there's a bad movie on. And the next thing you know it's 3:30 and you finished watching it and you don't know why in the world you did that. How many of you had that experience or something very close to it? Okay. That

happens because storytelling is a series of questions. And they're asked in such a way that the watcher or the reader asks 'what happens next?' It's that storyteller thing, when you started telling stories to your kids, or your parents are telling you stories – and then what happens? And then what happens? So you'll notice that – read that first sentence again, T.

TD: The one about the 4<sup>th</sup> of July party?

SB: That's right.

TD: Angela Tussant's 4<sup>th</sup> of July party began well enough, but no one would remember that because of the way it would end. That's what everyone would talk about later, the way it ended.

SB: Okay. So we have a person, we have a 'who'. It's a female person, we have that image in our minds. Whoever that is. Something about a part – ordinarily, something positive. The intonation of something ugly happening. That's what everyone would remember. People talked about it – and I think that the tone, we suspect that it wasn't something that was really good.

TD: And that's a semi-omniscient voice too. Because this is a very close third-person point of view. I'm actually traveling with Angela as she's dressing, as she's getting ready for the party. So who's that voice talking about the way the party's going to end? That's my omission narrator intruding on the story. And I use that for effect – that's almost the only time I use it, I use it for effect.

SB: It's an addictive process. The board, once again – one way of looking at the dynamics inside a story is goal – conflict – disaster. Goal, conflict, disaster. There's action and reaction; dilemma; decision or reaction. That a story can be viewed as a series of action-reaction units or question-answer, question-response, sound-echo. When you turned on that television show, if there was a character who you believed in enough to care about what happens to them, the filmmaker or the author will engage that character as soon as possible in something that touches one of the basic, universal human concerns – survival, sex, power, emotion. Something basic. So we have a character who wants something. Angela Tuissant wanted to have a nice party. We all understand when we have a party. Something went wrong. We don't know what it is yet. Why do cars slow down on the freeway when there's been an accident? We got to know! Why is the news mostly bad stuff? News has always been mostly bad stuff. It's a 24 hour news cycle – it looks like the world is going to hell – no, it isn't! We have an emotional reaction. The emotional reaction will give us, usually a pair of bad alternatives. Because if the reaction leads us to an answer immediately, story stops dead. But if the answer opens the story up so that something worse happens, then the character makes a decision which leads back up here.

Now, this loop: situation, character, objection, opponent, disaster. You go into a series of increasing tensions until you pay it off. Maybe it's rapidly: "Rodney Goodbye." Or sometimes it's after 800 pages or 1200 pages. But it's these loops of escalating tension. Now, this tension release / tension-release – and both people roll over and smoke a cigarette. Does this physiologically remind us of anything within human behavior? This cycle of tension and release is a physiological cycle. You hook your readers unto this cycle as rapidly as you can. What

Tananarive did was the first sentence, you can't read that first sentence without wanting to read the first paragraph. If she has hooked you with the information that had opened the door to new possibilities at the end of the first paragraph, you'll have to read the first page. If you read the first page and she's done her job right, you'll have to read the first chapter. And then she's got you, coz you can't do that standing in the bookstore.

So the creator's always in the process of asking questions deliberately and textually or sub textually. Like I said, the only way to really learn this is by reading and writing. It is impossible to say enough in a class situation other than to point you in the direction. Read the works of the masters. Read the first lines, the first two sentences of classic short stories and you will see in every case, they are hooking you. How are they hooking you? Because when you submit your work to an editor, don't say 'You know something? 60 pages in it got really good!' You don't have that much. You've got one page if you're lucky. If you could hook them with the first line, they'll read the next paragraph. From there they'll read the page. You hook them there, now you've got a conversation with the editor. And it's going to be both what they understand consciously and unconsciously. There's a sense of creeping dread that is generated by the kind of line that Tananarive wrote there. Something happened. It was supposed to be a celebration. Something happened that was terrible to this woman. Interesting name, who is she? Something terrible happened, what is it? You keep reading, coz you have to find out.

TD: When it comes to the precision of language, those of you who read poetry of course, and I have no memory for poetry or I would be reciting lines for you right now – poetry, I would put it at the top of the hierarchy. They don't make a lot of money, lord knows, it's hard to make a living as a poet, but line by line, that precision of the language, that is what makes it a poem. That's what makes it so beautiful so memorable. They have captured an image, a feeling, a moment in just this much space. That is a great art form. I am not a poet – I have great respect for poets. Short stories are a great example. I would say next to poetry, short stories and even screenplays because even though no one would read the screenplay, there's such an economy of language in screenplays. You don't have space to waste, you're just trying to paint enough of a picture for the director and the set designer and costume designer to run with it, okay? But it has to be very, very precise. Very, very vivid and very, very visual or you're not going to be happy with the final product as a screenwriter. Short stories, great attention to language. There is no room for a single word that doesn't belong in this story. Because you only have this much – you only have 20 pages or fewer if you're smart, trying to sell a short story. So make every word count.

And I think also language can play a great deal into how we create our characters. This will dovetail into the conversation we've had about characterization too. It's not only necessarily the way your character sees the world, as in the Joplin's Ghost excerpt. His frame of mind has really given direction to what we notice about this scene, but also making them living, breathing people so you want to cry at the end of the story, even if it has a happy ending. Because you don't want to leave them. There's a book called *The Ecstatic* by Victor LaValle. Many of you may not have read it, but it's about a mentally-challenged obese man who's also the narrator and he hallucinates, so he's the height of an unreliable narrator. We really, literally don't know page by page what's real and what isn't but it doesn't matter because it's so well-written. It's about the last time he was permitted to live with his family – it didn't go well. Told from a distance of years, and the language really was what drew me into this story. Because he doesn't sound like an overly-sympathetic guy, just in a first stroke really. But the language made me want to read



more about him. This is his impression of his sister; it's just a really brief passage. He's talking about his sister:

'She was 13 and thus only partially human when it came to compassion. Cami, her older brother by 10 years, but [inaudible 34:40] practically had to tie me down to cut my hair that first week back. I kept saying that I looked fine, no kid was going to enjoy that. Sarcasm was her mild revenge. Mom and Grandma were earnestly complementary. Anything I did earned praise. If I'd taken in an especially heavy bowling they would've bought me a squeeze toy'.

Now, what I like about that is the humor. There's a lot of humor interspersed throughout this story and even looks like something as fine as the distinction between saying 'they would've bought me a prize', which is also funny. But 'they would've bought me a squeeze toy' is more specific, and therefore to me, funnier. You know? Specificity is one of the roots of humor for me. And that's sprinkled throughout this novel. Just these little, unexpected turns and phrases and humor in places you wouldn't expect it. That was what made me keep reading on. Even though the guy is literally crazy and does some very unpleasant things throughout the course of the story – I'm in his corner. He's my guy, because I know him. He's the point of view character and a lot of that is rendered through the language. Certainly not by his actions – it's the language.

And don't forget about the power of humor when you're writing. Even if you're writing something very dark, you know? I wrote a post-apocalyptic – actually it's an apocalyptic story called *Herd Immunity*. She's one of the last survivors, wondering down the road and sees a guy with a guitar case. And all of her memories of all the destruction that has happened in the recent months, she can add humor – this is her way of keeping sane. In her narrator voice, she always had a thing for musicians. That's a hold-over- She's holding on to every last strand of her previous life she can as she's walking alone through this landscape of the apocalypse. Little dashes of humor here and there. I kept wondering, was the editor going to think that's too much? It's too flip? No, because it made her human. That was one of her survival mechanisms.

SB: Well, that's not a bad stopping place for this. Because I think that in our next session, what I'd really like to do is take the subjects that we have been dancing around so far. I talked about plot, you talked about character. We both talked about poetics. I'd like to have, kind of change hats and both of us talk about all of these different things in the next session. So, thank you very much.

W: So you mentioned poetry. So my question is, for both of you – do you actually read poetry?

TD: Not as much as I should.

SB: Not as much as I would like to. There were times when I was reading a poem every single day and I moved in and out of that, and there have been other times when I wrote a poem every day. Even if it was only, you know, just a 3 line Zen poem of some kind. I think it's extraordinarily valuable.

TD: Then I'm guilty of not reading as much as I should. I read much more as a student, when you're really pouring it, everything in that you can, all the nutrients. Poetry, even if you can't write it, or think you can't – I suspect I could write poetry if I studied it. So often we think we can't do something because we haven't done it. I don't think you wake up a great poet – I

think, to a large degree, great poets are made as much as born. But yes, done right – I wrote a poem, I can't remember it, sometime during the election cycle. I was in Philadelphia, I was literally looking at the Liberty Bell and the crack and it was the day he had enough delegates for something. I don't know what it was, but he was actually going to be a real presidential contender at that moment that I was staring at the Liberty Bell and I was moved to write a poem about it. But no, I don't read nearly enough.

SB: Anything else?

M: You mentioned a-ha moments. I'm not sure what you mean about that.

TD: Actually, I'm probably misusing the term slightly because it usually means the end of a mystery, and I mean it as the beginning. So I'm actually misusing it slightly. But for instance in *My Soul to Keep*, you know where I open with a young man visiting a sick old woman in a nursing home and he's filled with all this emotion about it. And right before he smothers her to death, she says 'Goodbye, Daddy!'

SB: That's not an a-ha moment. That's a WTF moment.

UD: Yeah, it's the WTF moment. It's like 'Wait a minute – that's her... what?'

M: Yeah, but you said phrases. What do you mean by that? When you're writing a sentence that's supposed to grab someone's attention.

UD: A grabber I guess would be another one.

M: Just to grab someone's attention.

UD: Just to grab her.

SB: A question – that's a huge question. An old woman is being strangled by a younger man and she says 'Thank you, Daddy!' – that is a question. What's going on, what in the world is happening. We have just moved outside of our universe. If you, and especially Tananarive writes beautiful memetic prose. She establishes a world that we believe in. As Stephen King does. When you establish a world we believe in and then violate it, you're yanking the rug out from under your reader in a very special way. Literally, you screwed with their sense of morality. Probably tomorrow we will talk about trance induction. Hypnotic trance because storytelling is trance work. And when you put somebody into a trance, their ordinary filters and defenses go away. And now you can actually play with the wiring in their head.

What kind of magic is it that black marks on a piece of paper create images and sounds in your mind? Utter magic. What is going on with them? Study hypnosis and you'll see tremendous parallels between storytelling and the hypnotic trance, shamanic trance whatever – beautiful stuff. So that's all she did – she created a very realistic universe and then pulled the rug out. This is not our world. The reader has been seduced into walking through that universe as if it is theirs and suddenly they realize it is not, and now the reader must rely upon the writer to get them back out.

TD: And we can talk about this more in genre writing which is the session after – we have two sessions remaining. Hopefully you will stay. We can pretty much begin the next one right away.

SB: Let's take a 5-minute break.

TD: But yeah, the more you steep it, especially in speculative fiction, the more you steep it in the mundane, it's a little harder maybe in some far future, science fiction where so much of the world is unfamiliar. Technologies we don't have, but there's always something that doesn't change. But if you're writing about humans, human psychology is not going to change. There should be enough that's recognizable in the story that the speculative element – and this works great in horror too. Like mundane, mundane, aaah! It's like – so and the more mundane, the scarier. It is when it pops up. Stephen King is just a master at that. The people you know, places you know, brand names, songs on the radio – he just paints it all, and then slowly you understand you are not in Kansas anymore, Toto. Slowly. And you can't get home without him. You just pray, you just hang on for the ride, hoping he's gonna get you back home again. It's a sacred obligation – you realize the relationship between the writer and the reader. The filmmaker and the audience. There's a contract. The audience is saying 'Please, entertain me. Show me something that I have not seen. Introduce me to someone I do not know. Help me understand something more about myself in the confusing world that I'm in'.

There have been studies showing people who are sitting in emergency rooms waiting for loved ones to live or die, who are reading fiction fare better than those who are reading non-fiction. They're asking us to make sense of a world that often does not make sense. And I'm perfectly willing to talk about my philosophies or my cosmology, my epistemology. But I'm not asking you to accept mine. I'm asking you to have one that is as real for you as mine is for me. So that you can paint a world and then violate the principles of that world, hurt the people within that world, but then take them home, in whatever it is you think home is. For some of you, home is hell and what's happening in this world, this horror because for you, life is horror. There's a terrible, terrible movie called 'A Serbian Film' – I had not seen it. But it contains imagery that I would not even mention to you. But the people – I met a woman who knows the filmmaker who made this thing. He grew up in a warzone in Serbia and this was his reality. He was trying to say 'This is our pain; this is our suffering. This violation of everything that you hold sacred, this is our reality.' I could not watch a movie like that, but I understand in a very real sense it is art. It is self-expression. It is real.

You make sense of your lives and you make your stories from that place. And then trust it. If you're being honest, there are people out there who are just like you. None of us are so different that if we tell the truth about who it is that we are, someone else would not stand up and say 'Yes, I felt that too'. And that's all you need. You don't need a gigantic swath of people to support your work. You need to feel that you are heard. You need to feel that after you're gone, somebody could pick this up, look at it and say 'Ah, I know who this person was.' Satisfy that part of you and you'll come the closest that you could come to making art and being successful with your amount of talent and energy and your opportunities and so forth. But first make sure you're telling the truth so at the very least you'll feel like you did the job for you. Because if you sell yourself trying to get money, without having told the truth, then your only reward is money.

And if you don't sell it, you got nothing. You got nothing at all. Any other questions or comments? Then let's take our break and let's get back.