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Life at the intersection of grace and growth.

The Insecure Writer's Challenge

How to Create good & beautiful things in spite of your insecurity and perfectionism.

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Welcome

Welcome! This workshop is titled, "The Insecure Writer's Challenge: How to Create good & beautiful things in spite of your insecurity and perfectionism." My name is Marc Schelske. And I'm the one teaching this topic because I am an insecure perfectionist. Am I the only one?

I like to make good and beautiful things. I've even come to the point where I think I might have something good and beautiful to say to the world. But my biggest obstacle is a deep, abiding insecurity and the accompanying armor of perfectionism.

The Problem of Insecurity

I've always been a maker. For a while—in what feels like another life—I was a songwriter. I was in bands. I played guitar every day. I had notebooks full of lyrics I was writing. Because I was also a worship musician, many of the songs that I wrote were worship songs.

In the crazy and unexpected way that these things work, one of my songs started having a life of its own. It got sung at a summer camp, and then those kids went home to their churches and colleges, and over the course of a couple of years this one song made its way around the country.

About this time I got an email. It was from Worship Leader Magazine. Every month, along with the magazine, they sent out a CD. This CD was a collection of new songs they were recommending worship leaders try out. (This was before everyone could find new songs easily on the internet.) This email was inviting me to submit my song to be considered for one of recommendation CDs.

Reading that email was one of the most exciting and scary things that had ever happened to me. I never answered it. I had good reasons. I didn't have a demo-quality recording. I knew I wasn't a professional-grade singer. I didn't have the money to get a recording made. Like I said, Good Reasons. Time passed. Eventually the email was so old that it felt awkward replying to it. Then one day – maybe a year later – I just deleted it, and didn't think about it again until last year.

OK. Here's my truth: I didn't ignore that email because of my voice, or my demo. I ignored the email because I was terrified of being rejected. Sure kids at summer camp liked my song, and people who knew me, they liked my song, but...strangers? Professionals who live and breathe music, people who could with one decision validate me and open up new opportunities for me? Being rejected by those people would be crushing, so I never even gave them the chance.

Our Fear and our Need to Belong.

I thought that it was my perfectionism that got in the way. But perfectionism is just the armor we wear to hide our fear. The heart of that fear is Insecurity. We feel secure when we know that we're loved, when we know that we're enough, when we trust that we aren't going to lose our place at the table. When we don't feel that or believe it, we feel insecure.

Here's our problem: When you create, you expose yourself. And then you're vulnerable. As a creative person, that's hard. You made something. You put it out there. It feels like a part of you:

Agents are judging whether it's marketable. Critics are judging whether it's worthy. Readers are judging and leaving reviews on Amazon. If you blog, every single day you can measure the judgement. Page views, unique users, Facebook likes. Shares. Re-Tweets. Email subscriptions. Each one can feel like a thermometer stuck right into your worth as a human being. It's brutal.

So, how do we deal with this? I can't solve your insecurity for you. But I can offer you four challenges. If you can do these things, you will improve your ability to create good and beautiful work in spite of your insecurity.

Challenge 1: Face Your Story.

I don't mean the plot of your novel. Here's what I'm talking about:

When you get your 15 minutes in front of an agent, for some of you, it's going to be an out-of-body experience. You'll be at the desk, talking to that agent. But in your heart, you'll time-travel back to the playground, with the cool kids picking teams. You're friends are getting picked. People who aren't as good at the game as you are getting picked. An anxiousness is going to grip you by your gut. That feeling has very little to do with your manuscript or your ability to present it, and everything to do with your story.

Your story is the internal narrative of your life: What you've done, what's been done to you (The events)—and more importantly, the meaning that you've assigned to those things. That story lives in your mind and heart and constantly pushes for expression. The insecurities you have grow out of your story.

Why is it easier for you to spend an hour organizing your writing space than it is for you to write? Why do you have a love/hate relationship with the writers you've met online that are "doing better" than you. Why do you have a hard time telling people that you're a writer. The answer to those and similar questions lie in your story.

The core insecurity in the seedbed of my story is this: I am not worth keeping around.

I always saw myself on the outside of every community I've ever been a part of – even when that was not objectively true. I always felt that if I didn't provide real value to the people around me, they would walk away. As a pastor (my day job for nearly 20 years) I always had to serve more, be more available, be more powerful in the pulpit. I felt that if I ever stopped the treadmill, people would leave me. This story drove me, and eventually, about 8 years ago, nearly wrecked my life. If that story is interesting to you, you can learn more on my blog. A chunk of this will be in the book I'm hoping to have published in the next year.

Because of our limited time, I'll leave you with this. There are two options. Your personal story will unconsciously drive you, or you can get to know your story and understand it. When you face your story, you begin to see your insecurities for what they are. When you do that, they begin to lose energy and power over you.

I did this with the help of a great counselor. You might need that. I can't recommend it enough. Or perhaps you can do it with a process of journaling and reflecting—as a part of your writing.

This is your first challenge: Get to know your story and how it has shaped you.

Challenge 2: Get Honest (Give up trying to find your voice.)

You've undoubtedly heard of the vital and mystical journey every writer has to go on to find their voice, right? Your voice is what makes your writing unique and special. Your voice is that thing an agent responds to. The tone, the personality of your writing. It's what readers connect with.

I'll read anything that Anne LaMott writes. I don't even agree with her on a number of pretty significant things. Why? Because I've connected with her voice. Because voice is so important, it becomes an enormous playground for our insecurities.

When I started blogging in 2010 I spent a lot of emotional energy and time worrying about my writing voice. After a couple years of twisting myself into contortions trying to sound like a writer, I realized something – I've done this VOICE thing before, just in another context.

I've been a professional speaker for a little more than 20 years now. I'm closing in on a 1000 presentations. During that time, I went through a bunch of stages trying to find my voice as a public speaker.

Early on there was my "Karaoke stage" where I tried speaking in the style various famous speakers I admired. Then there was the "Memorized Perfection stage" where I not only wrote the presentation word-for-word, but then memorized the tone, the gestures, the whole darn thing. (It was perfectionism out of control.) Then I was in the "Speaking Factory stage" where I presented 3 different original talks every week for two years straight.

Through all of that I've tried on a pile of different voices. I've channeled African American preachers, comedians, TED talk presentations, the voice I imagine favorite authors speaking in. In all of that time, I was building skills. I was building experience. I was building courage. But I wasn't really finding my voice.

Over and over I had this one experience. I'd put hours and hours into a presentation, crafting every edge, and the audience would be unmoved. Then I'd take a risk, push past the very visceral panic in my gut, and share something from my own journey. Some moment of insecurity or fear, a place where I blew it, my own weakness and doubt.

Those moments? Every. Single. Time. People responded. They were moved. They were challenged. They grew.

I found my voice when I started telling the truth. The more I did this, the more I had a consistent, recognizable, engaging voice that people responded to.

For an insecure perfectionist the temptation is often to emulate the voice of someone you want to be like. To present your writing like movies get pitched: "My writing's sort of like Ann LaMott but for the John Eldredge audience." Or you run in the opposite direction, working hard to come up with a voice that's so unique, it's like nothing else out there.

Donald Miller said: "I think most writers try to come up with a voice and a tone, but I think the real struggle to write a great book is figuring out who YOU are and expressing it." Your voice is going to emerge when you start being boldly honest and authentic. The more you worry about your voice, the more you are trying to craft something, and that will always come across as affected. Artificial.

When you write, tell the truth, tell your truth, and tell it as truthfully as you can bear. Your voice will emerge all on its own.

Challenge 3: Act in Fear.

Your perfectionism will steal opportunities from you – like my ridiculous experience with that email about my song.

Maybe you've got a book written and no agents are interested, but you're afraid to self publish. Maybe you've got a great book idea, but you're afraid to pitch it to the agents. Maybe you want to create something – an online course, or an ebook, or a new website, but you don't think you can afford to do it, and your perfectionism won't let you look for alternative ways of getting it done. In every case, you're letting fear steal your growth and opportunity.

Not too long ago, I decided I wasn't going to do that anymore. I'm still an insecure perfectionist. I still have fear. That means I'm either going to feel afraid and do nothing, or I'm going to feel afraid and act. Those are my choices. Those are also your choices.

Two years ago, I signed up for a high-end conference for speakers. The whole time I felt desperately out of my league, like I was going to be discovered as a fraud. It was one of the best learning experiences of my adult life.

At last year's FCW Conference, when I registered I saw the option to sign up for agents and editor's appointments. I was working on a book and I thought, "Man, it would be a great experience to pitch that book and see what feedback I get." So, I signed up. For all of them – all the appointments that I could get.

About a week before the conference I went on the website and saw the names of the people I'd be pitching to. I read their bios. I nearly lost it. The credits they had, the books they'd gotten published, the authors they represented. This wasn't playing around. I started to panic. That's actually the first time I thought about that email I had deleted years ago. I was terrified. I didn't know what to do, so I reached out to a few published authors I knew online and asked them. A few were gracious to give me some advice. I wrote my pitch. I practiced it and practiced it.

On Saturday morning I gave that pitch back to back five times in a row. It was harrowing. I was sick to my stomach the whole time. But I got great feedback, and I got asked by multiple agents for a copy of my proposal, and as a result, I'm now represented by Tawny Johnson of D.C. Jacobson with a book in development.

Then this year, I approached Cornelia, the director of the conference, and said to her these exact words: "I'm done letting fear steal my opportunities. You don't know me. You may think I'm crazy. But I want to speak at next year's conference."

As I've begun to practice ACTING WHILE AFRAID, my insecurities have actually gotten quieter because it turns out most of the fears I conjure in my head aren't real. You start acting and seeing that you don't actually die. Even when you fail, even when you really are rejected, it doesn't hurt as much as you think they will.

That frees you to create.

Challenge 4: Be Generous

Common insecurities for creative people often have to do with acceptance. Am I worthy? Am I enough? Because of our story, we live with a sense of scarcity.

We don't have enough time. We don't have enough money. We even treat our ideas with this same attitude. We hoard our best ideas, because we want to save them up for just the right moment, and the right presentation. We believe we are not enough; so we live like we don't have enough.

Challenge this belief by choosing to be generous. Acting in generous ways requires you to step away from being self-protective. Generosity directly undermines our fear that we are not enough.

So, what might this look like for a writer?

First, Share your expertise. One of the best things about a conference like this is that we can meet people who are good at things we aren't good at. And we get to meet people that we can help. So what is easy for you? Are you good at creating a narrative? Are you good at social media? Are you good at brainstorming? Are you good at technology? Whatever you're good at, use that to help other people succeed.

Second, If you're online – Twitter, Facebook – use that platform to amplify and elevate other people. Find great writers that you like. Find bloggers that no one else is listening too. Find causes that connect with your heart and share them. Use whatever platform you have to elevate and amplify other people.

Third, when you have a product—A book, a course, a membership, whatever – give a bunch of it away. I know. You're worried about making money back. Your publisher will want to recoup the advance. That's fine. You'll do that too. But make sure you're giving your best content away.

There are great marketing reasons to do this. There are great psychological reasons to do this. There are great platform reason to do this. But if you're an insecure perfectionist, the most important reason is this: When you give your product away, you are re-writing your story.

Every time you choose to be generous, you are living in a way that is rooted in a sense of security and abundance.

Take the challenge and clear away the fog.

Recently, my family and I got to spend a few days in Astoria. Beautiful little Oregon coast town, at the mouth of the Columbia River. The best-known image of Astoria is the stunning Astoria-Megler Bridge, that spans the Columbia, just over 4 miles from one end to the other.

The last day of our visit, I woke up early and went out to do some writing in the sitting room that overlooks the river and the bridge. The fog was so thick I couldn't even see the first row of trees in the backyard. As I wrote the fog slowly burned off. Over the course of about 3 hours, I watched the bridge appear. First you could only see the peak. Then a little more. For a while the Bridge looked like it launched from Astoria up into the clouds.

For a long time my insecurity and perfectionism obscured my creativity in the same way. That's what they do. They get you focused in on yourself, on your fear, on protection. Great art doesn't come from that place.

An hour later the fog had pushed out into the middle of the river, and the Bridge was fully visible.

Face Your Story. Get Honest. Act in Fear. Be Generous.

These 4 challenges give you the opportunity to push back the fog, so that you can create good and beautiful things, in spite of being (like me) an insecure perfectionist.

Thank you.

Marc is a writer and speaker who focuses on life at the intersection of grace and growth. You can learn more him and what he's working on at www.MarcAlanSchelske.com.