Theme Building Exercise

            As I often say, *“a sentence is a thought fully expressed; a paragraph is a thought fully explained, and an essay is a thought fully explored.”* The main thing each of these statements have in common is that they each deal with a single thought. In writing this is called *“Unity,”* meaning that any writing piece, no matter how long or short, needs to be unified behind a single guiding thought, and that thought must always reflects a singular theme, and hence, have unity—that single main thought is the heart of that writing piece—and that heart is what pumps the lifeblood and it is what gives a sentence, a paragraph, an essay, a poem, or a story, its life. This central guiding thought is called the “theme.”

In the same way that we naturally speak in sentences and paragraphs, we are also naturally guided by themes when we talk with each other. It is rare to be telling a friend about a heartbreaking loss in a baseball game and then randomly switch to talking about digging up worms to go fishing. In conversation, it is almost like we have a disconnect detector, and when our detector senses a conversation going off track, it gives us a warning; “Danger, Will Robinson, you are flying massively off course.”

One of the main reasons I assign so much writing to my students is to force them to bring their writing to the level of their normal speech because, as humans, we really do practice unity of speech in our everyday conversations, but we often lose that unity when writing—and the big question is why?

It is because we write so slowly, carefully, and thoughtfully as if wading through a swamp where every step is bogged down by the weight of our efforts

But it is also because we write like we are in a massive bumper car war in total darkness.

Either way it is not a natural way to do things.

The middle ground is to develop your writing “voice” to the point where writing does become a natural way to  express your thoughts fluently and confidently in strings of words tied and woven together by a unity of theme. I need to write deliberately and attentively to try and recreate the inner voice that is guiding my thoughts. I have to try and stay focused enough to stay on the right track even if (like right now) I come back to a writing piece many hours, days, weeks, or even years later. If I have strength as a writer, it is not the subtleness, worldliness, or wisdom of my thoughts; it is more that years of practice have helped me, for better and worse, to write like I think and speak. I am comfortable with how and why I write, and I enjoy exploring thoughts (themes) and seeing what is created out of that first seed—that first theme—that started the ball of this writing piece going.

How to Create a Guiding Theme

**The Theme Building Exercise** is simply an exercise in creating themes out of the experiences of your life that you (as the writer) can narrow down to something you can write about in a single paragraph—in this case, the narrative  paragraph. If you use my narrative paragraph rubric, you will see that it goes from a broad theme to a narrow theme, which is then narrowed down even further in the one/two punch to create a tightly focused theme that you can write about in the confines of a single paragraph because it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully “explain” a broad and universal theme in a single paragraph.

      In this exercise, you take a meaningful experience you have had, and then you try to capture the broad universal theme in a single short and pithy sentence. Don’t refer to yourself or your experience in the broad theme.

**For Example:**

* + - **Experience #1:**Meeting old friends at your summer camp.
* **Broad Theme:**Old friends never become strangers.
* **Experience #2:**Your dejection after a hard fought athletic contest that you should have won.
* **Broad Theme:**It’s easier to fall in a hole than climb out of it.

      Each of these two broad themes are themes that any person in the world could or can relate to in an immediate way, and so the broad theme acts as a hook to entice your potential reader to read on. The trick now is to shift the theme to something that happened in your life; so in the narrow theme write a sentence that captures that theme at work in an experience in your life.

**For Example:**

* Old friends never become strangers, **especially if those old friends are my summer bunkmates from Stinson Lake in the White Mountains of New Hampshire.**

      Here I have taken the broad theme and added a narrow theme and used an experience from life to show that theme at work in my life—my own narrative—and now all I need to do is narrow it a bit further and I’ll have a good and focused ‘guiding thought” around which to build the rest of my paragraph.

**For Example:**

* Old friends never become strangers, especially if those old friends are my summer bunkmates, Mark and Bingy from Stinson Lake, in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. **From mid-June, and the end of school, through Labor Day, and the beginning  of school in September, we were a small band of brothers living like feral children in paradise.** **Outside of those summer months, we never saw each other and seldom spoke or wrote to each other, but in those summer months we became the friends that time, distance, fate, or fortune could not--and will not--separate.**

That last sentence is the final narrowing of the theme for my paragraph. I would follow this with some specific examples of stuff we did together, and follow that with a reflection about the importance of this friendship in my life--and that would be my paragraph, and a darn good one at that, but only because I put everything a good paragraph needs into that paragraph. Without an effective and compelling guiding theme a paragraph is a car without an engine: it just won't go anywhere--except downhill.

**Exercise #1**

In this exercise, come up with two meaningful experiences of your own, and try to create your own guiding theme using the same steps outlined above.

**Narrative Paragraph #1**

1. Meaningful Experience: [put text here]
2. Broad theme: [put text here]
3. Narrow Theme: [put text here]
4. One/two Punch: [put text here]

**Narrative Paragraph #2**

1. Meaningful Experience: [put text here]
2. Broad theme: [put text here]
3. Narrow Theme: [put text here]
4. One/two Punch: [put text here]

Think of this "formula" for creating a guiding theme whenever you are writing about a personal experience. A paragraph without a guiding theme is like an egg without a yolk, and if you become an expert in creating and narrowing down themes, you will never be stumped by a writing assignment that ask for "paragraphs!"