

WHO'S YOUR GURU

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ABSTRACT

Who's Your Guru is a satire about the self-help industry and a comedy-drama that explores what happens when you push away emotional pain hoping it will disappear. Protagonist Claire Dupont navigates life with blinders on under the assumption that she will be fine - providing she practices positive thinking and ignores her past. But as old wounds re-open, Claire finds herself unable to forgive and must face what ails her if she wants to lead a meaningful life. In the end, she realizes that pretending she's not fragmented will never make her whole and the only way out of her pain, is *through it*.

Claire Dupont is a forgiveness 'expert' who cannot forgive the ex who abused her. The story follows Claire as she struggles to hide the truth from others and herself until it begins to erode her relationships as well as her purpose in life and the career she once loved, now founded on lies. The protagonist is driven by an inability to forgive her abusive ex and faces what happens when suppressing past hurts is no longer effective. It's about being authentic and dealing with those feelings because as Carl Jung once said; *whatever you resist, persists*.

Claire begins to understand there is a cost to suppressing her feelings of anger, resentment, and betrayal as she juggles the expectations of an industry that shames her for not being able to rise above the transgressions made against her as she strives to become authentic.

I believe an expectation to forgive others is higher for women than men. We are expected to love our children unconditionally and care for our aging parents, regardless of our emotional ability to fulfill these obligations when things become challenging. Women are often held to an impossible standard of compassion, neglecting their own impulses to explore suppressed feelings that require

their attention. Leaving their personal issues aside, they continue to be dutiful often to their detriment. And although I believe things are slowly moving away from these double standards, a woman's ability to forgive is an extension of these stereotypes - making it even more difficult for them to heal old wounds.

If you are female, the pressure to do what's right becomes magnified over time along with the shame that failure to do so will forever mark you and disappoint others. And so, women are forever in a bind, caught between a need to honour themselves authentically or uphold a historical precedent that asks them to deny their humanness. The truth of the matter is not every woman is a sage, but every woman has the right to be whole.

In an ideal world, forgiveness is a solution that heals the heart while payback is what children do in the playground when someone cuts in line for the slide - it perpetuates more of the same. WYG suggests that to benefit from the healing powers of forgiveness, it must begin with the self. One must dig deep, face their shadow, and admit the deleterious effect trauma has had on their lives – whether it's shame, denial, or other negative manifestations. And that can be hard. It takes courage, honesty, and sometimes a very long time.

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it's my right to do so providing the material rings true. It turned out to be the hardest thing I've ever done. I want to thank my reader, Marie Rickard for offering advice I initially resisted, that in the end proved invaluable.

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SECTIONS & INTRODUCTION

In the INTRODUCTION, I will share the seed of my story idea and describe the circumstances around which my contemplation of forgiveness bore fruit. For Claire (like myself), the fallout of being a victim of abuse lingered long after it occurred (and long after either of us thought we had dealt with it). But healing is a long-term partner with whom one experiences many stages of grief along with many failed attempts at closure yet it's a relationship worth the investment.

The next section of the document – PROCESS & CHALLENGES – explores my process and habits as a writer, how my story morphed out of multiple versions, and the challenges I faced with perfectionism. I failed to realize there is no such thing which means chasing it, was futile. In the end, perfectionism is little more than evidence of a fear of unworthiness. But I can't dismiss it entirely as it was a motivating factor too – I was never afraid to start over again in the hopes of getting it right. Which I did multiple times.

Of all the books I read while writing my script, the ones on STRUCTURE are at the top of my list. My overzealous need to understand structure (as if one held the key) led to information I have now categorized and jotted down in notebooks to suit every stage of development and to which I will refer repeatedly in the future. It was not a waste of time, yet there came a point when I had to put it all aside and just write. In this section, I will mention the experts from whom I distilled golden nuggets of wisdom and how they influenced *WYG*.

Next, is CHARACTERS & ARCS. Each character will be described, followed by their arc and how each of their journeys related to Claire's as well their contribution to different themes.

Following Characters and Arcs, I will discuss GENRES & THEMES. *WYG* is a social commentary on the dangers of the booming self-help industry when it pretends to solve deeply rooted trauma with quick and easy fixes. What started as a comedy-drama eventually evolved to incorporate satire. Although secondary themes include forgiveness, betrayal, and authenticity, the main theme in *WYG* is that there are no shortcuts in life when dealing with emotional trauma.

In FILM INFLUENCES, I will discuss the different films that influenced my writing with respect to character development, story, and decision-making while keeping alive the idea that it was possible to be bold and write something original that people could relate to.

I will end with CLOSING REMARKS where I will share some final thoughts on my overall experience, my golden take-aways, and where I hope to go from here. But first, a synopsis to orient the reader.

Who's Your Guru

Author and forgiveness expert Claire Dupont gets her big break when she's invited to *Who's Your Guru* after going viral – but only because she lost her cool on host Jasmine Lee who brought up her abusive ex during *Cable Access Live*. Dubbed “honest and raw but no forgiveness expert” Claire must now convince the world and guru Nick Nightingale that she's still the expert she claims if she has a chance of joining the ranks of the coaching elite and help her son's failing business. But Claire soon realizes that not all wounds have the easy fix she professes in her book *Fuggive n' Fuggetaboutit*. In the end, Claire must choose between her crumbling charade or admit she needs help so she can begin her healing journey.

Introduction

Sometimes, one incident in life becomes the impetus of an idea – even if it's years down the road. For me it happened when I heard my ex wanted my forgiveness. I hadn't seen him in fifteen years, but he was sick with MS and declining quickly. No one knew how long he had but *he told someone, who told someone else, who told me*, that he had to see me. It took two years for that message to reach my ears. But when it did, I assumed the sentiment had survived. I imagined a film-worthy resolution and the peace it might bring us both – for me closure, for him, penance. There's nothing like forgiveness to lighten the load. But I was wrong.

His room was easy enough to find at the hospice. Walking in was the hard part. When I finally entered, I did not recognize him. If it hadn't been for the tiny photo of him with his younger brother, I would have thought I was in the wrong room. There were no personal items, no flowers from family members, no music, and no table lamps to add warmth or a personal touch. Even the curtains were closed. The room glowed a dull yellow from the lights above. It was a testament to how his family had also abandoned him thanks to his abusive nature.

And there he was, lying on his back, helpless. The bully of half my adult life had wasted to eighty pounds of unrecognizable flesh and bone. His hands were bound by ties in his lap, as were his feet to prevent the inevitable cramping that came with the later stages of MS. And yet I felt the same old fear. Any moment, I thought he would sit up and terrorize me like before and the joke would once again be on me. But I addressed him anyway.

And he pretended not to know me.

I tried to jog his memory. Surely he remembered his three sons and what he had done to them. And that's when he said, "I did nothing" and told me to get out. I was paralyzed.

How do you forgive someone if they don't know who you are? Or pretend not to?

I had conceived of every scenario except for the one where he was self-righteous, and I didn't exist. I thought surely his disease would have prompted a degree of humility, but I was wrong. My intention and the relief I had hoped to gain, suddenly disappeared. He was robbing me of closure. It enraged me. Once again, he was dominating the discourse. Didn't he realize how vulnerable he was? How easily I could have removed the pillow from his head and...

I buried the horrible thought and forgave him anyway. Because that's what good people do.

I thought that would be the end of it and I could go on with my life, details of the abuse diffused to the opaque color of objectivity because at least I had tried. But that was not the case. Over the years I realized that forgiving someone was more challenging. It had layers. When my boys struggled unnecessarily, I blamed him. When old patterns prevented me from attracting a healthy relationship, it was his fault. I resented him for the ongoing financial responsibilities he had burdened me with. When he eventually died – during grad school at York and on our youngest son's birthday – I thought it was finally over. It was not.

I never went to the funeral.

By then I realized that attending would not bring me any closer to healing those wounds. I didn't go because I didn't want to. For once I was honouring myself. I didn't want to deal with the

hypocrisy of his family who spent years ignoring his mental health issues and the abuse he doled out. I wanted no part of any of it.

The first time I wrote the above scene I mentioned, it was word-for-word what had happened in real life. The second time, I snuffed out his life with the pillow and it turned into a drama. The third time, a giant teddy bear fell on his face accidentally and it was a dark comedy. The fourth time, his family was there. The fifth time, I was alone. You get the idea. But in the dozen versions I wrote I forgave him every time, like I did on that day.

But at some point, it dawned on me that I hadn't forgiven him at all.

And if I were to write this script authentically, I had to explore how truly difficult forgiveness was – not just for me, but many people. To do that I had to honor Claire's internal struggle and put her through the wringer – caught between a rock and a hard place. And the stakes had to be high enough for her struggle to become her dirty little secret.

Now I had a story.

THE PROCESS AND CHALLENGES

The blank page is welcoming because it's something I can fill it with. It's my task, my mandate, my joy – even the days when you pace – to put words and characters on that page to help me sort out my life.

– Ron Shelton

Writing something too close to home is always ill-advised. One lacks objectivity to see through the flaws in the story because of its emotional proximity. I was warned of this several times. But as I struggled with this truism and berated myself for choosing it anyway, I found the above quote by Ron Shelton (*Bull Durham, Tin Cup, White Men Can't Jump*) and re-assessed. If the only benefit of this process was to help me sort out my life, then it will have served its purpose. It was if anything, cathartic. And it became my hope to write this story with enough deftness for an audience to experience the same catharsis. In this section I will share where the story started, how it changed, my process and habits as a writer, and my challenges around perfectionism.

The Process

My general process was to write an outline, then write pages to test out scenes to explore my characters, or even write a rough draft – which I did several times. When I finally tackled the five major turning points as an independent exercise, it was harder than I thought. But this strategy gave me clarity. It allowed me to see if the overall structure of my story was working. The next time I write a script, I will first write the five main plot points - *inciting incident, first act hook, midpoint, second act break, climax* - before I even attempt an outline. But once these are established, an outline is crucial. And no one was a bigger proponent of outlines than my advisor, Howie Wiseman. And I couldn't agree more.

But writing scenes or even full sequences (even if unused, deleted or replaced) was an invaluable and necessary part of my creative process. Because in the most poorly written scenes, there was always the seed of another idea I could use to make my script better. Perhaps Howie was trying to save me the aggravation of investing in something that wasn't going to work and truth be told, I wrote hundreds of pages that will never see the light of day, but it was vital to my exploration of story.

Andrew Stanton of Pixar was well known for saying “fail early and fail fast” and “be as wrong as fast as you can”. It was all about:

[subverting] the negative connotation associated with making mistakes” [because] if you aren't experiencing failure, then you are making a far worse mistake: You are being driven by the desire to avoid it... And... trying to avoid failure by outthinking it, dooms you to fail.
(Catmull, 109)

And when I ignored my impulse to write scenes until I had perfected an outline, I got stuck. My creativity felt stunted in an effort to get it ‘just right’ when sometimes what I needed was to write and fail and write and fail and feel my way through the characters and the story, regardless of how circuitous that path became. What worked best for me was; write an outline, write a few scenes, analyze what didn't feel right, get feedback, repeat. It was laborious, but at this stage of my development as a writer it was essential.

I often persevered without sending new versions to Howie for review because I was still sorting out my story and trusted the feeling that what I wrote was good. (The illusion of a great scene kept me going even though I knew better). Then I left it for a while – usually two weeks – read it again, made revisions then sent it off for notes knowing I had done my best.

Sometimes life got in the way and I didn't touch the script for months. During my time in the program I experienced the death of my ex, my best friend's daughter's suicide, a family member's cancer, major surgery (me), my youngest son's painful divorce, the birth of my granddaughter, moving provinces in search of work, Covid, and my aging father's decline. I wrote mostly in binges because when life got quiet, I had to take advantage and didn't want to lose momentum. And that led to a lot of versions of a script that are now unrecognizable from my first draft.

Multiple Versions

It took a long time for me to embrace the idea that it would take multiple drafts to get my script to a place that was good enough to defend. And these weren't minor changes. I added characters and dropped others, changed the setting, altered the goal, and even the main theme. The only thing that made me feel better about having wasted so much time in the marshy goop of story, was a quote I read in *Creativity Inc.*:

“Pixar films are not good at first, and our job is to make them so- to go, as I say, “from suck, to not-suck.” This idea- that all movies we now think of as brilliant were, at one time, terrible – is a hard concept for many to grasp... And this is as it should be. Creativity has to start somewhere...” (Catmull, 91)

The following are some of those not-so-good script ideas and how they morphed into the current one.

First version

The Gift of Gab was an ensemble piece, a road trip movie, a romantic comedy, and a story about two sisters in a strained relationship. It was about Internet dating, being ghosted, and wanting to find the guy, confront him and make him regret his decision. It was too many things at once. In this version ‘Gabby’ was a substitute teacher and part of a Goddess group determined to help her discover the truth about her Internet relationship. It was based on a chapter from my book on Internet dating and revolved around betrayal. But my main character was weak and lacked agency - a victim of her own design - who needed a group to rally about her to set things right. Frankly, she was kind of pathetic. After some feedback from Howie, I realized it was also unoriginal. It was a story about a woman chasing a man and coming up short only to find she had what she needed all along through family and friends. And what’s more, it had failed the Bechdel test – a work of fiction in which at least two women talk to each other about something other than men. This was not something I wanted. I had written a couple of drafts before dismissing it entirely and starting again.

The hardest lesson I learned from round one was non-attachment – how to let go of something that doesn’t work. What I hadn’t accepted yet was how this would become an integral part of uncovering my real story. For now, letting go and starting again was a process I resisted and hated because of how much I had invested. Little did I know I was just getting started.

Second version

Goddess Inc. was another ensemble comedy. Gabby was now Claire, studying to be a yoga instructor and member of a yoga studio she could barely afford and for whom she would like to

work. Unfortunately, she was not *Lululemon* material. Claire was clumsy and loud but with a heart of gold. But as luck would have it, she got her break to lead a swanky yoga retreat and thought her dreams of becoming part of an elite yoga company were about to materialize. Little did she know that her ex sister-in-law Vicky, was the one who made it happen. She wanted to blackmail Claire into granting her dying brother (Claire's abusive ex) forgiveness. All hell breaks loose at the retreat when Claire realizes she's been manipulated. To keep her exclusive gig, Claire tries to forgive her ex but can't. By the time Claire is ready to do so, it's too late and he has died leaving Claire to deal with her unresolved issues.

Claire represented yogis and spiritual enthusiasts who use 'spiritual bypassing' to live a life with no personal accountability regarding their issues. My story was slowly incorporating satire as it explored the practices of New Age communities. One yoga teacher I knew had intense road rage and was an alcoholic. Another teacher I knew had a fragile ego and a competitive streak, which caused multiple fallouts with friends and co-workers when her spiritual superiority was questioned. The one thing neither could ever admit to having, were flaws. Both my advisor Howie and one of my writing professors, Amnon Buchbinder, were instrumental in supporting my view: there is something dangerous in a New Age culture that uses spiritual practice to sidestep unresolved emotional issues.

My challenge became about towing a line between authentic people in those circles and those who were deliberate in their intent to avoid personal work and even profit from it. I didn't want to call down yoga retreats or the benefit one could legitimately get from attending classes! Yet the admiration I once held for yogis was replaced over the years with disenchantment and disdain for a growing number of 'spiritual' people who thought their purist attitudes determined their place in the totem pole of their subculture – and mine. The humility and authenticity I had once so loved

was disappearing in the light of profit and competition. Retreats charged rates that were out of reach for most people, so did healing workshops and self-care spas, training seminars and intensives. These benefits had become the domain of people with money and time to spare while those who needed it most, could never afford it. But at least there were self-help books I could rely on for guidance... until I realized that they too, fell under the same scrutiny. And that's where my third version really took hold.

Third version

I chose the self-help world as the setting for my story because it is a giant industry that holds the power to do a lot of good (or harm) in society. At its best, the industry provides strategies for improving the quality of one's life and coaches are sincere. At its worst, some strategies encourage denial and coaches are ill-qualified to give advice. Any inclination towards negativity is discouraged. Self-help books promote sunny dispositions in the belief that this approach is the answer to manifesting the life you want, when in reality...

“The great story of each of our lives is this: to engage honestly in all aspects of our psyche. Only then can we as individuals move towards any semblance of unity and connection with our authentic self. And in doing that, we come alive, we feel fully powerful.” – Carl Jung

And so, my protagonist became not the victim of an industry that encouraged spiritual bypassing, but someone who encouraged it. It was the seed of an idea that would challenge Claire when she finally faced the abusive past whose trauma she could no longer deny. And just like that, after two years, and three completely different story ideas I was finally at a place where I could begin.

Challenges

I have this rule I live by: only do what you can do. That means you're never looking outside for what's popular; you're always looking inside for what's true.

- Delia Ephron

I don't think it was a popular choice to make my story a comedy. My committee reader, Marie Rickard, once warned me (and rightly so) that I could not take abuse and make it funny any more than one could take the topic of rape and do the same. But for me, comedy was a venue to deal with unthinkable, painful memories, and disarm them. It took the sting away and diminished the power these things had on my life. But I had to be careful in the execution.

I had to take the topics of abuse and forgiveness and incorporate comedy without being insensitive, while also honoring victims of abuse. The closer I got to the truth of the story, the more serious it became, but the more determined I also was to keep the comedy alive. As it turns out, comedy is one of the hardest genres to write. I studied it, learned the do's and don'ts and went past what was acceptable in drafts just to feel how far I could tow the line before my story became downright offensive. Nuancing the script was extremely challenging and I hope I have done it justice, yet I know there is always room for improvement and still welcome feedback on it. My other challenge revolved around the idea of PERFECTION.

It's not that perfection cannot be achieved. It's that it's so hard to stop there.

- Robert Brault

And that was my problem. After reading my script, James Dunnison once wrote in an email, "Is there ever an end to improving a script"? The answer of course, is no because you can always

find ways to make your script just a little better. Michael Arndt, who wrote the Oscar-winning screenplay *Little Miss Sunshine* once apologized to actor Toni Colette because her character was ‘the only one that didn’t have much of an arc’. But at some point, you have to stop writing.

Always live up to your standards—by lowering them, if necessary.

- Mignon McLaughlin (American journalist and author)

Howie warned me about perfectionism. He suggested I work with what I had, rather than make big, sweeping changes as I was prone to do when I got feedback (or when a better idea hit me). Suddenly I saw myself getting caught in a temporal loop of endless productivity with no results if I didn’t reel it in and focus on my already functional script. It became less about graduating from the program than it did about getting it just right. But that’s impossible. As Professor Jill Golick from York once told me, “There are many ways to tell the same story, and none of them are wrong. At some point you just have to pick one.” Stellar advice.

I can’t honestly say that I’ve let go of the perfectionism. I still tweak scenes endlessly and spend hours revising, just to make one subtle change that only I would notice, but I have learned not to berate myself for writing something less than perfect. I realized that a desire to be perfect is simply a disguise for the insecurities of being human – frail and mortal. And I have never met a writer who hasn’t been insecure about their craft. I was in good company. I am still learning how to let go of perfectionism and probably always will.

STRUCTURE

Structure was my saving grace through this process and the one thing I could rely on to set me straight when I had lost my way in story. It was an invaluable roadmap that always brought me back to the core of my idea.

I wrote three feature scripts before going into this program and hadn't read any screenwriting books. Big mistake. My first script got into Praxis and never went further. The second one got me a job offer to write a horror script - but I turned it down because I didn't think I could pull it off. And although the third one received some attention on Inktip, no one was interested. By the time I had written my third script I had finally read Syd Field's book, *Screenplay*. He had done a great analysis of *When Harry Met Sally* by one of my favorite screenwriters, Nora Ephron. And suddenly, everything made sense.

Just because we are all born with an ability to recognize a good story – thanks to thousands of years of oral tradition – doesn't mean we know how to write one. That's why even the least refined of movie-goers can tell you if a movie was terrible but couldn't write one to save their lives, even though the most common retort is "I could do better". We all get it on a fundamental level. It's in our blood, our consciousness... our very connection to one another is built on it.

Any random viewing of video clips in Amnon Buchbinder's *Biology of Story* reveals this truth in droves. But recognizing structure so you can gauge the quality of your story against it, is vital when you are stuck. I start with an idea and build my story around my character's need. For me, a character-driven story over plot-driven has more soul. But in the end, even a character-driven story needs structure to give it bones. The purpose of structure is to make your story work. It's a

tool I use to help me clarify why something isn't working. Below are three structural tools I use to see if my story works, what it looks like when I plug in my story and how they fare.

Five Main Plot Points

I would never write another screenplay without doing this first. A good script can be stripped down to its 5 plot points. I think of plot points as the engine of a script. Each one drives the story forward with the scenes preceding it working their way to where that action takes place.

The inciting incident (p. 14) – *Claire is interviewed for her new book on forgiveness and then cornered into admitting she never forgave her ex.* The inciting incident throws the protagonist into the main conflict of the story. We immediately know that her internal journey will be to forgive or admit that she hasn't been able to. One way or another, she must deal with her past.

The first act break (p. 27) – *In spite of her interview fiasco, Claire has been given a chance to redeem herself and save her reputation as a forgiveness expert by participating in the biggest life coach conference of the year.* But we all know she has failed to address her underlying issue. This is where the conflict really takes hold. She is put in a new environment where the thing she cannot do is crucial to her external success but detrimental to her internal one.

Midpoint (p.52) – *Claire is given the opportunity for closure in front of a crowd and pretends to do it. Given the choice between authenticity and emotional growth Claire chooses the low road and digs her heels in.* This additional conflict gets in the way of the protagonist's internal goal of being true to her feelings but achieves her external goal of becoming a great life coach. She is now fully committed to her lies. This act will soon become detrimental in her relationships. In other words, it's a false win.

Second act break (p.81) - *Claire and her son Matt have a falling out when he is released from the hospital after a panic attack. Concerned for his well being, Claire wants to talk but he lashes out and tells her she is in denial and her positive thinking is garbage.* This is the worst conflict

in the story because it dawns on Claire that her spiritual bypassing and lies have consequences on the people she loves. Matt needs real solutions to his problems. She quits Nightingale only to be emotionally blackmailed into staying. Shame and pride prevent Claire from again choosing wisely.

Climax (p. 94) – *It's Frank's funeral and Claire is expected to say a few kind words about Frank. But after hearing more platitudes about him, none of which hold an ounce of truth, Claire can no longer hide her feelings. She tells everyone, including Matt, how she really feels and admits to everything.* This is the moment of truth. Regardless of the consequences, Claire has finally made a healthy choice that will begin her healing journey.

One thing I would like to mention is that I did not necessarily write my plot points in order. I always knew the ending of my story, but I was unsure if confronting Frank should take place in Act 1 as the inciting incident or the Act 2 turning point, or the midpoint. I tried all three. When one didn't feel right, I would move around those pivotal scenes to discover where they would best fit as plot points to find the arc of my story.

Frank Daniel's *Sequence Approach*

Daniel's *Sequence Approach* breaks up a script into eight sections. Act 1 has two sequences, Act 2 has four (two in the first half, two in the second), and Act 3 contains the final two sequences. I found this approach useful for finding inconsistencies in the protagonist's journey as well as hitting the five main plot points discussed above for proper placement. But the first time I tried this, it was ten pages long and filled with details about secondary characters which made everything harder to follow. I learned the shorter, the better. If I focused solely on the protagonist, I could more easily see if the events logically supported her journey and reflected the character's arc. And I loved coming up with the titles for each sequence. It gave each one a

succinct purpose. Anything that detracted from the title, probably didn't belong in it. I moved quite a few scenes around thanks to using this method.

If I were to do this again, I would set limitations – 5 lines per sequence or a total of 2 pages with a focus on the protagonist. But even as I rewrote this for my support paper, I found myself making changes that are now in my script. It works well to identify problem areas.

Sequence one – Everything is under control / nothing is under control

Author and forgiveness expert Claire Dupont hopes one day to become a successful life coach and help countless people. She gets her shot to impress fans when she is interviewed by Jasmine Lee on Cable Access Live for her book “Fuggive n’ Fuggetaboutit”. But Jasmine ambushes Claire by bringing up her abusive past and reveals that Claire never forgave Frank, the ex who abused her twenty years ago who is now dying. Her career is over. She goes out for a conciliatory drink with producer Grant from the show, who is far too young for her.

Sequence two – Second chances

Claire's interview goes viral and she captures the attention of Monica Proud, PR exec at Nightingale Corp, a self-help industry giant, and Claire's former sister-in-law. They haven't spoken in years, but Monica needs a new client for Nightingale's declining numbers and offers her a spot at Who's Your Guru – an exclusive life coach conference. At first Claire declines because she hates Monica for abandoning her years ago but after finding out that her son Matt's business is failing and he can't get a loan, she accepts hoping to get a payday and help Matt.

Sequence three – An opportunity for redemption

When Claire gets to WYG, Nick Nightingale, father of the industry, offers Claire a spot on the mainstage where she will get a chance to redeem herself and regain her reputation as a forgiveness expert. Nervous about her upcoming performance, Jeffrey – Nick's assistant and a Reiki master - tells her she must come to terms with her past to gain the confidence she needs to be a success.

Sequence four – All in

Claire visits Frank at the hospice with a get-well card to finally deal with her past, but upon seeing him, is filled with anger and tells Frank he got what he deserved. She tells no one but her agent Louise has overheard and says nothing.

Claire's unresolved issues begin to affect her. She meets Serena the Shadow Mother in the tent next to hers and notices their ceremonial tea. Serena tells her it helps people face their fears but requires supervision. Claire steals a bottle at night. She goes home and drinks the tea hoping for clarity and courage but has hallucinogenic dreams instead. She wakes up late and rushes to her presentation.

She now wants to bail but Matt is in the audience and the stakes are high. Fueled by audience support she starts to feel empowered until Nick presents her with a surprise – an opportunity for closure with Frank, live. Nick wheels him out and with calculated compassion, Claire forgives Frank publicly, and is applauded for her magnanimity. Claire has reclaimed her title as a forgiveness expert and is offered a position with Nightingale Corp.

Sequence five – Things are never as good as they seem

Nightingale has cut agent Louise out of the contract. Her and Claire have a falling out and now Nightingale Corp now has creative control. Nick wants a *tell-all chapter* on Frank and getting her advance is contingent upon it. When Claire wants to start coaching for money, she is told she must first take their program, which is six months long. Claire goes back to writing the chapter but can't do it. Jeff recommends a therapist to help her. Claire discovers that Dr. Bacchus is Serena, the Shadow Mother. Claire asks Serena for a quick fix to help her write the chapter, but Serena advises against it. Claire gets a call during her session from Monica that Matt is in the hospital. Angry that she isn't there for him, she takes it out on Serena, and rushes out.

Sequence six – I quit

Claire finds out Matt suffers from anxiety and had a severe panic attack. Matt refuses her help, stating that manifesting doesn't work and that she got into *WYG* because of Monica and accuses her of having blinders on in life. Hurt, Claire realizes he's right and hates what she is doing and quits. Monica blackmails her into staying by threatening to be the one to help Matt out financially if she doesn't come back.

Claire goes home and in a drunken stupor calls Grant, to keep her company. When she tries to kiss him, he rejects her nicely because she has too much stuff to work through. Claire kicks him out, opens a window and screams, only to find out that her cat Homer fell out the window during the

night and is on the pavement below severely injured. Meanwhile, Matt goes to the hospice to see his father but when he gets there, Frank is having a heart attack and dies.

Sequence seven – The show must go on - or does it?

Wrought with regret and pain, Claire visits her agent Louise to tell her about Frank and make amends for her actions. Louise won't take her back as a client, but they reconcile as friends. Claire convinces Matt to go to his father's funeral.

Once again, Nick has created a financial opportunity by turning the funeral into a follow-up special. Claire's job is to write nice things on Frank's coffin and say a few words. When she realizes Nick hired his own people to mill about and say platitudes about Frank, she can't take it. Claire walks out of the funeral.

Matt follows her out and tells her she can't just leave and do whatever she wants. She confesses everything and tells Matt (and the crowd) that she never forgave Frank, then appeals to Matt for understanding but he turns on her and says she never considered how any of this affected him over the years and walks away, leaving her stunned.

Sequence eight – the road to healing: accountability

Alone, Claire must now deal with the mess in her life. She finds the card for Dr. Bacchus and makes an appointment, realizing she must finally deal with her shadow. She writes a new book called *Frankly speaking* and helps Matt get back on his feet by coming up with an idea to help his struggling business.

The *Sequence Approach* does a good job of sorting a script into pieces but one of its biggest benefits was that it enabled me to see the story in digestible bites. Writing a sequence is less daunting than tackling a whole act. If you think of the sequence approach as 8 shorts, it feels more manageable. On top of that, you don't necessarily have to write your sequences in order because each one has a beginning, middle and end and should be able to stand on its own. This approach helped me tremendously and gave me permission to write sequences out of order. When I was

stuck on one sequence, I felt comfortable working on another because it was a self-contained exploration of the goal identified in that sequence.

The Hero's Journey by Joseph Campbell

This is one of my favorite reads because of the sheer understanding Campbell has for the trials and tribulations undertaken in the hero's journey. These stages can be applied to most protagonists, but I was careful not to take them too literally and in their specific order. I used them as a general guideline to track Claire's journey and even now I find it useful when it comes to moving scenes around for greater effect.

Ordinary World - Claire is confident, opinionated, funny, and in control. She has left her past behind where it belongs and believes the road to happiness is to ignore the messy stuff.

Call to Adventure (inciting) - Claire is caught lying about having forgiven her ex Frank on TV and storms off. It goes viral and she is offered a second chance and a spot at Who's Your Guru life coach conference by the sister-in-law she feels betrayed her years ago.

Refusal of the Call - Claire refuses the offer then changes her mind when she realizes her son Matt needs help financially.

Meeting the Mentor - Louise, Claire's manager, is her mentor. She looks out for Claire and tries to do the right thing by her.

Crossing the Threshold - Claire enters the world of the self-help industry.

Tests, Allies, Enemies - We meet Jeff, an ally, Nick Nightingale, an enemy, who will test her and challenge her personal beliefs.

Approach to Inmost Cave – Claire prepares for her big presentation using all available resources: she gets Reiki from Jeff, sees Frank in person for closure but can't bring herself to forgive him and then takes ayahuasca for clarity but instead has hallucinations about Frank. When Claire arrives at her presentation, she is a mess.

Supreme Ordeal – Disheveled, Claire arrives at *WYG* ready to bail on her presentation but changes her mind when she sees her son in the audience. Nick tests Claire’s resolve by bringing Frank on stage in a wheelchair for closure. Rather than come clean, she embraces her fate and forgives Frank publicly, though not privately.

The Reward (seizing the sword) – Claire arrives at Nightingale ready to embrace her destiny but discovers things are not that simple. Not only has Louise been cut out of the deal but Claire must adhere to their rules and play the game; write a new chapter about her marriage to Frank and take their coaching program before becoming a coach. Unable to complete her the chapter, but determined to succeed, Claire sees a therapist for advice.

The Road Back – Claire gets a call that Matt is in the hospital. Accused of denial by her son and promoting false hope, Claire wants to quit Nightingale but Monica blackmails her into staying. She goes home frustrated and after a night of drinking, leaves a window open only for her cat to jump out in the night and severely injure himself. In the meantime, Frank has died.

The Resurrection – It’s Frank’s funeral and though Claire tries to keep her cool she can no longer stand the hypocrisy and loses her temper, telling everyone how she really feels and confessing to Matt that she never forgave Frank but needs his understanding and support. Matt reproaches her for her selfishness and never taking into consideration how hard it all was on him.

At odds with her son and having sabotaged her career, the only thing Claire can now do, is confront her emotional issues and rise from the ashes anew.

Return with the Elixir – Claire slowly gets her life together. She sees a therapist, helps Matt with a business idea, and writes a new book about how she is still unable to forgive Frank, but admits that the hardest person to forgive, is yourself.

Though many other books now occupy my library and fill notebooks with golden advice, a final nod must go to Michael Arndt and his discussion of three types of stakes, not two: Internal, External, and *Philosophical*. While the first two are obvious to most writers, philosophical stakes add yet another layer to writing. It refers to the dominant values of society vs underdog values – which will be further explored in the section on films.

It is with deep humility that I acknowledge all of the incredible screenwriters and academics listed in my bibliography who have dedicated their time to analyzing the craft, and by doing so, given me a lifeboat when I thought I was drowning.

CHARACTERS AND THEIR ARCS

CLAIRE DUPONT (50s, protagonist, life coach)

Claire Dupont claims that the key to living your best life is to forgive quickly and then forget about it when it comes to your past. But beneath her false bravado she has never actually dealt with hers. The more she ignores it, the deeper the hole gets. Claire is about to enter the dark night of the soul and doesn't know it. She's earnest and motivated but in denial.

ARC – Claire begins her story by sweeping everything under the carpet. She goes from denying her true feelings, to accepting them. Claire's arc follows to some extent, the stages of grief – denial that anything is wrong, anger (her interview), bargaining (justifying her ongoing pretense), depression (it's not working, as evident when her son rejects her), and acceptance (when she finally admits her feelings at the funeral). **THEME:** *The only way out, is through.*

LOUISE MAY (70, Claire's agent)

Louise supports Claire unconditionally because she believes in her even though Claire can be difficult. They've been in this together since the beginning and she's loyal to a fault.

ARC – Though Louise has her reservations about *Nightingale*, she encourages Claire to take the offer to appear at *WYG* because her career is in trouble. When Louise reads the concessions Claire must make as dictated in the contract, she realizes that selling your soul to the devil is not worth the price of success and tries to talk Claire out of it. Louise eventually forgives Claire but no longer represents her. **Theme:** *Be true to yourself. Authenticity matters for peace of mind.*

JASMINE LEE (30's, Newscaster/interviewer)

Jasmine is a Diane Sawyer wannabe, working cable access and doing “meme of the week” for an audience who gets their news from Twitter. She is out to prove herself in a competitive industry as a ‘real journalist’. She’ll do anything – include humiliate others – to get there.

ARC – Jasmine doesn’t have one. She represents the ruthless nature of the media.

MONICA PROUD (50's, Nightingale's VP of Public Relations, and Claire's sister-in-law)

Monica oozes Ivy league MBA. She's done well at Nightingale but wants more. She has no warm feelings towards her brother. She's ambitious and is gunning for a promotion. Career has always been more important to Monica than family.

ARC – Monica starts off as ‘all business.’ She goes from being in it for herself to realizing that life is more fulfilling when you care for others. **THEME:** *It's never too late to start again.*

JEFF (20's, Nick's PA, Reiki Master)

Jeff is Nick's PA but also a talented Reiki Master. He works for Nick because he's been promised a shot at being a coach when the time is right. Jeff is focused, organized and the guy who keeps everything together when it's falling apart.

ARC – Jeff accepts how Nick treats him as par for the course but becomes increasingly agitated as he develops meaningful connections. With Monica's help at the end, Jeff realizes he will never be appreciated by Nick and must make his own way in the world. He goes from being disempowered to empowered. **THEME:** *You can't ignore abuse and still honor yourself.*

MATT DUPONT (30's, Claire's son)

Like Claire, Matt has difficulty dealing with his past and talking about it. He owns a struggling VR arcade and has anxiety but doesn't want to talk about either. He stuffs his problems down, and practices magical thinking just like his mom taught him.

ARC –The more Matt pushes down his feelings, the more they manifest as anxiety and panic attacks. Though Matt believes these come from financial stress, it's his inability to tell his mother how he feels and deal with his past that triggers them. Matt will come to realize that he must confront his mother, and deal with his feelings around his father if he is to address the root of his anxiety and move forward. **THEME:** *The only way out, is through.*

NICK NIGHTINGALE (70, father of the self-help industry)

Nick is vain, narcissistic, insecure, and uses those around him for personal gain. He is a self-proclaimed God of the self-help industry, but his coaching business is slowing down and he's smart enough to recognize that. Claire will serve his purpose nicely.

ARC - He is the narcissist that uses spiritual bypassing to justify his behaviour. He represents the sad truth that some people take shortcuts and are rewarded for it. But in the end, Nick gets his comeuppance when Jeff leaks information to the press that reveals an ugly truth about his business.

THEME: *In the end, you might just reap what you sow.*

FRANK DUPONT (60, Matt's father, Claire's ex)

Frank is a cantankerous man, declining rapidly because of a stroke and his mental health. He is narrow-minded, negative, angry, and steeped in it. Frank represents someone who gets to the end of their life having made no progress in their own personal development. Though Frank does have mental health issues, his cantankerous nature reflects a stubborn and arrogant personality.

ARC: Rather than choose redemption, Frank embraces his self-righteous indignation when given the opportunity to change. *Theme: A inability to change can lead to a lonely, unhappy life.*

GRANT (30s, Producer, sweet on Claire)

Grant is a well-meaning young man who is at times silly and idealist. He keeps coming back for more even though Claire doesn't always treat him well. But even Grant has limitations.

ARC: When Claire reveals herself to him as someone with too many unresolved issues – after pretending otherwise – he draws a boundary. Grant may not be the perfect fit for Claire, but he has standards and know when it's time to back off. *Theme: Authenticity matters.*

In the end, most themes revolved around the importance of authenticity - especially for my main characters. Claire had to examine her feelings authentically to grow from them and become whole, Matt had to do the same so he could deal not only with his anxiety but his unresolved feelings around both his father and mother. Monica was authentically motivated initially because her career was number one – until it wasn't. When leading an authentic life meant including family, she had to decide whether working at Nightingale supported this objective. It did not. More on themes in the next section.

GENRES AND THEMES

In this section, I will briefly discuss the two main genres in my script – satire and comedy – and then move on to identifying themes. Ever since I read Jonathan Swift’s *Modest Proposal*, I have been drawn to the art of satire. His piece was brilliant in its straight-faced, satirical depiction of poverty in England. My area of focus in Satire is the self-help industry.

I will be the first to admit that I have a library full spiritual guidance and self-help books – everything from Eckhart Tolle’s *Power of Now* to Esther Hicks’ *Ask and It is Given* (I even owned *The Secret* once). These books gave me hope when things were rough. But I have replaced many of these with books by respected professionals like Dr. Brené Brown and Dr. Edward Hallowell. Like so many others, I discovered that easy fixes don’t work. Many coaches profit from people who are too busy to do their personal work. But there *is* no easy answer.

Unfortunately, it’s still a trend that encourages people to give up good jobs in search of magical thinking that tells them “It’s as easy to manifest a mountain, as it is a button” (Esther Hicks), “Your word is your wand” (Florence-Scovel Shinn) and other quotes I used in the opening scene of my script.

Coaching is an unregulated industry where anyone can call themselves a life coach and charge whatever they want. Tony Robbins has no formal training yet has been coaching people since high school. In 2019 he came under scrutiny for his tough love approach with clients who had been abused, and those who were suicidal when he told them it was time to ‘stop playing the victim’. When doing research on his organization, it was anything but transparent. To get a price quote I had to leave my phone number so someone could call me back to discuss packages. I was

even willing to attend his seminar in Toronto to see what all the fuss was about until I learned it was \$4,000 for three days. Even the title of my script was inspired by his Netflix special - *I Am Not Your Guru* - which speaks volumes of his underlying message.

Coaching is still a very young industry started in 1998 by Thomas J. Leonard who founded the *International Coaching Federation* (a benchmark for the industry) as well as the first coaching university (aptly called *Coaching University*). I have no qualms with the idea of coaching – as a matter of fact good coaching can increase happiness and productivity. But it should be regulated, its training rigorous, and have limitations because it has the unchecked power to do more harm than good and many people have suffered because of it.

Comedy

Comedy reminds us that life is pain, and pain is surmountable.

– David Misch

I always believed that comedy was one of the best ways to explore difficult subject matter.

Humor makes people comfortable because it lets their guard down and opens them up to listen. I think perhaps this is the reason I am drawn to it.

Tragedy reminds us that if not for our flaws, we could be strong, principled, and heroic. Comedy celebrates what we are – weak, corrupt, and frightened, but raucously, outrageously alive.

- David Misch

I read somewhere that *humor is that way of seeing the world that keeps us from throwing ourselves off a cliff* - and that was certainly true for me so I fought for the comedy to emerge.

Abuse is perhaps better suited to drama, but I didn't want to write my story that way. I'm not drawn to write drama except in smaller increments or individual scenes. I watch it sparingly at home (I've had enough of it in my own life) and it's more fun to write comedy. But as I found out, it's also more challenging. It helped that I had studied some comedic plays in my undergraduate studies, but I still didn't know what the rules of comedy were, so I looked them up and used a checklist to see if I had succeeded. Here were some of my discoveries pitted against my script:

- *Comedy plays with the notion that we think we are free, when in reality we are not.* Claire believes this to a fault when in reality she is a prisoner of her past and her emotions.
- *In comedy, those who are enemies in the plot, become friends at the end.* Though Claire and Monica are not good friends at the end, a potential for friendship exists. I tried a version where they simply parted ways (agreeing to disagree) but something was missing.
- *The world of the hero should be somewhere special.* Placing much of Claire's journey at the *Who's Your Guru* conference and Nightingale Inc. was crucial to its comedic potential. It would not have been as entertaining had Claire been struggling to build her own coaching business at home – which I tried.
- *A comedy can become serious – closer to the end, as more becomes at stake - but a drama cannot be turned into a comedy.* I moved a lot of scenes around thanks to this bit of advice– including the one where she sees Frank privately for an apology which was originally at the end of Act 1. It just didn't work there. But it did work as things began to derail in her life.
- *Your main character should face opposition from all side with no safe port in the storm, and the journey must be fought with endless complications and obstacles.* Claire is faced with:

concern for Matt's financial needs and then his health, Nightingale's restrictive contract, the new chapter, Frank's refusal to demonstrate remorse, Louise abandoning her, Monica blackmailing her, Grant rejecting her because of her baggage, her son rejecting her, her cat almost dying, losing it at the funeral, getting fired from Nightingale – among others.

All in all, writing comedy was a joy even though I once read that you should write comedy when you're in a bad mood because comedy often comes out of anger (true and the best advice I got about working through resistance). As it turns out humor is a defense mechanism more socially acceptable than violence. It's a way to help people deal with frustration and anger. But my script also incorporated drama. One of my challenges was learning to balance a heavy scene, (where humor might not be appropriate), with a lighter one without making the subsequent scene feel out of place. I hope I have succeeded in this.

Fairytales / Dream Sequence

One last genre in my script deserves a nod – the fairy-tale (even though I ended up deleting it and replacing it with a shorter, comedic version after Claire drinks ayahuasca). But whether it's an induced hallucinogenic experience or a fairy-tale like dream, both represent our subconscious. When we refuse to address our fears or concerns, they can come out in dreams. Claire as the powerful Goddess Kali, has anger issues that are fueled by fear. Though it is not yet evident to her in the dream sequence, her journey has less to do with Frank than it does with taking responsibility for how she feels and how it has affected Matt on an emotional level. At this point in the script (closer to the midpoint) she is not ready to do so. The KISS pinball machine represents Claire's continued focus on external matters. She thinks helping Matt financially is

the answer but it's only half the equation (and the lesser half at that). It is her failure to face this truth that eventually causes her meltdown. The reason I included her beloved cat is because Claire's conscious choice to ignore her issues, creates collateral damage for those she loves and she doesn't even realize it. Homer was the culmination of that cost. And the reason I named Dr. Bacchus' cat Penelope was that Penelope was the name of Homer's wife in *The Odyssey*. Homer could not return home until he had learned his lessons. Penelope represents family and the reward that awaited Homer. The same was true for Claire. She had to do real, therapeutic work and come full circle to find fulfillment in her life.

Theme

Theme starts with emotional indignation.

- Karl Iglesias

Had Frank apologized to Claire on stage at *WYG*, that might have been the end of the film because it would have taken the wind out of Claire's anger and her journey might have begun. Perhaps she would have rejected it, but it would have been there for the taking.

Claire had spent her whole life being angry not only that Frank abused her, but that he felt no remorse – which became evident as the story unfolded. It was the ultimate indignation and proof that she had been right all along to hate him. But as I began to write, my original theme of forgiveness proved to be far more complex.

Forgiving is Hard

True forgiveness is tricky. As a teacher, I know how easy it is to get students to apologize for bullying behaviour but it's usually to avoid the principal's office or a phone call home. Ninety percent of the time, kids don't mean it.

In a book called *Forgive and Forget: healing the hurts we don't deserve* Louis B. Smedes says that apologies are a civil gesture, but they don't replace repentance - if you don't mean it don't say it. But our society has come to expect the civility of forgiveness. It's an expectation designed to keep the peace. We are too busy, too tired, and too overwhelmed with responsibilities to dig deeper. Surviving this life is enough. But it doesn't solve the underlying problem. The same goes for forgiveness, which when "cheaply given, is dangerous." (Smedes, 112) Smedes' advice is to "forgive freely, or not at all" (Smedes, 104). He goes on to talk about how forgiveness can come in bits n' pieces, or all at once but it's not as simple as society would like it to be.

Unfortunately, many books on forgiveness that have reached bestselling status promote the simplicity of it or rationalize traumatic events as inevitable in one's life. While well-meaning, they often skip over the hard work it takes to get to the part where letting go can be effective and release you of the burden holding on to anger creates. Colin Tipping's *Radical Forgiveness* gives advice from the standpoint that even the hardest lessons in life – such as bigotry, genocides, and racism – are pre-determined and agreed upon by both parties prior to this life. Kyle Gray's *Wings of Forgiveness* is a popular psychic who recommends the power of Angels to help you forgive and let go of your hurts thus putting once again, the responsibility in someone else's hands – in this case, an eternal being. Dr. Edward Hallowell on the other hand, wrote a book called *Dare to Forgive: the power of letting go and moving on*. The title alone suggests

there are challenges around forgiveness but the reward you get should you achieve it is worth it. He advocates a step-by-step approach to getting to a place of releasing that includes acknowledging the hurt. looking at the pain and even imagining a vengeance if you have to, but never acting on it. Unfortunately, for every book by someone like Hallowell there are a dozen more by life coaches with no education who promote easier fixes.

Claire represents the latter. She tells people it's easy. Forgive, then move on. And I believe she represents a big chunk of society that would rather see it that way than deal with the ugly truth. I rewrote the ending numerous times and each time, Claire forgave Frank, even if she was screaming it. But in the end, I came full circle and realized that the most important person Claire had to forgive, was herself and that's when her journey to wholeness could begun.

Betrayal

The theme of betrayal in my script did not become evident until the later drafts but watching them emerge added a complex layer of emotions for many of my characters and challenged me to adjust the scenes accordingly. Here they are below in the hopes that they came across clearly in the last draft:

Claire feels betrayed by Monica, for abandoning her when Frank was abusive. Louise feels betrayed by Claire when she chooses Nightingale over their partnership. Grant feels betrayed by Claire because she presented herself as authentic but wasn't. Claire feels betrayed by Matt because he chose to call Monica from the hospital. She also feels betrayed by him because he didn't tell her about the seriousness of his anxiety. Matt feels betrayed by Claire because she won't look at the truth and doesn't really listen. Jeff feels betrayed by Nick for never giving him

a chance to become a life coach. Claire feels betrayed by Frank because he violated a sacrament of marriage to honor and protect her. And finally, Claire feels betrayed by an industry that promises solutions that don't deliver and then is disillusioned because she spent her life upholding their mandate only to discover it doesn't work.

The Only Way Out, is Through

Ignoring something you don't like or don't want to think about, doesn't make it go away. In other words, *sometimes you have to endure the dark night of the soul and sit in the discomfort of your own pain*. Some people call it your shadow. Jung calls this necessary growth *the dark night of the soul*. Whatever it is, it's uncomfortable, ugly, and necessary if you are on the path to wholeness. Here's how some of the characters deals with this theme:

Claire spends her life ignoring her past only for it to come up when she is cornered by Jasmine in the interview. She confronts the ultimate dark night of the soul in her dream when she is swallowed by a giant snake in a pit of darkness, Frank represents Claire's pain and her writer's block. She has made herself so numb to problems in general, that she turns a blind eye to Matt's issues- hearing only what she wants to hear. She assumes that if he uses her methods, he will come out of this fine and his business will flourish. Claire is quick to surrender to things she wants to hear to suit her purposes, but circumstances force her into a corner. The harder she tries to push away the truth, the harder it pushes back until Claire melts down at the funeral, is left completely alone and realizes the only way she to heal her relationship with Matt is to face the problems she has ignored for too long.

Matt unknowingly follows in the footsteps of his mother, as children often do. He doesn't get help for anxiety and it puts him in the hospital. And though he tries to salvage his business, he does not reach for help. In the end, Matt makes his health a priority. He tries to find closure with his father but he's too late. Then he watches his mother unravel but chooses to walk away from her, determined for once to take care of himself because *sometimes love is not enough*. In the end, Matt finds his own therapist to deal with his anxiety and unresolved issues.

Though Monica's journey is not as drastic as Matt's or Claire's (and her feelings for her brother are buried so deep we don't really see them), the anxiety she admits to having is indicative that she has not escaped the damage caused by having an abusive brother (or maybe she did run away from the situation as Claire suggests). But Monica takes the first step by asking Matt for the name of his therapist and by walking away from an organization that promotes denial in the interest of profit.

The above three are the main themes I feel are in my script as they apply to the main characters. But there are minor themes that play off the larger ones. Louise, Grant, and Jeff all touch upon another theme: *the importance of authenticity*.

Their actions suggest that one's self-worth is tied in to how authentic you choose to be and who you want to be around. Grant chose not to be with Claire when she revealed her inauthenticity and pretended to be someone she was not, blaming others for her problems. Louise was disappointed with Claire and wouldn't answer her call after their falling out because Louise missed the authenticity Claire had before getting involved with Nightingale Corp. and finally let their friendship go because of it. Jeff realizes his self-worth at the end when he admits to himself that he had been blind to Nick's inauthenticity all along because he wanted so badly to be part of

the organization. Rather than choose to remain in this toxic environment, he left to pursue a more authentic and appreciated path.

In this story, I believe both the main and secondary themes are interwoven like a tapestry. When you feel *worthy*, it is easier to be *authentic*. When you are *authentic*, you are *not in denial* because you have nothing to hide. When you are *authentic*, you can work *through your problems*. But when you feel shame or are afraid of what you might find, you go into *denial*. As I grappled with my themes it became evident that where one ended, another began. Which theme(s) take center stage could be up for debate depending on what the reader gets from the story and how it relates to them. I do not believe it is possible to separate a viewer/reader from any story and because of this, I have chosen to leave my themes more open-ended.

FILM INFLUENCES

Although many films were instrumental in influencing my story, the following were particularly important for one reason or another: *Erin Brockovich*, *The Shop Around the Corner*, *Shirley Valentine*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Bridesmaids*, and *Brittany Runs a Marathon*.

As my story morphed, so did my viewing choices. I gravitated to films that put aspects of mine into perspective, guided my process, and offered an example of how something worked *well* - often when I was stuck. When my story morphed *again*, I repeated the process. For a while I tried to find films that might match my story's paradigm but that was futile. So, I read scripts and watched the films discussed in screenwriting books when the talking points revolved around problems I had with mine or mentioned things I wanted to improve. Analyzing the following stories (either by viewing or reading them) helped me to see my own story with a more critical eye and make crucial improvements.

Erin Brockovich is known for its remarkable opening sequence. In less than ten pages, Erin finds a ticket on her parked car, has a car accident that is not her fault, sees a lawyer to sue the guy who hit her, is unfairly humiliated in court for how she looks, loses the case and owes her lawyer money she doesn't have. By now we know that she has 3 kids, 2 ex husbands and is unemployed. But she's got Moxie and makes the lawyer who helped her (and failed), give her a job. Not only does Susannah Grant establish Erin's world and her goal flawlessly, but she plants one obstacle after another in front of her protagonist and keeps it up. Erin is a formidable main character not only with agency but in how she responds to circumstances beyond her control so that even when she screws up, we are rooting for her. It sets the bar high. Reading Act 1 of *Erin Brockovich*. gave me a new perspective on Claire, who at the time didn't have enough agency to

make her much of a hero worth rooting for. Things were happening *to* her, not because of what she did but often because she was a victim of circumstance. My goal was to find ways to give Claire more agency over her destiny and thus make her a more memorable hero.

The Little Shop Around the Corner, a delightful 1940 film starring Margaret Sullivan and James Stewart was invaluable for its structure. Here was a rom-com purported to have no big character goals, nothing major at stake, and two equal protagonists with no character arc, yet the story worked beautifully. The film became the inspiration for *You've Got Mail*, penned by Nora Ephron (who added external goals for the main characters - independent bookstore vs a big chain). *The Shop Around the Corner* however, relied on dramatic irony and dramatic tension to keep the audience interested. Here were two main characters who worked together, couldn't stand each other, yet were falling in love with their secret pen pals (each other). The tension was palpable. It was around this time, I realized that Claire's job and her internal struggle had to mirror one another to make for a better story. Claire started out as a school teacher, became a yoga enthusiast, a restaurant owner, then was a yoga instructor. But none of those felt quite right - until I made her a life coach. Now we were getting somewhere. But to achieve true irony, I had to take it one step further and make Claire a forgiveness expert who couldn't forgive. This was my creative irony. Creative tension came from the fact that only the audience knew. This strategy helped me to make choices around whether Claire should tell Louise, or her son, or if Monica should know. In the end, the less anyone knew the better it was for the story and the more anticipation it would create when the truth was finally revealed to the other characters.

Shirley Valentine was the first film I watched and the main character *Shirley* – a bored, unappreciated housewife and mother – was the way I initially imagined my protagonist to be in

the sense that she was a woman who didn't quite know what she wanted, but didn't want the life she had. It was part mid-life crisis, part wanting to feel passion again; a coming-of-age story for an older woman. But Shirley was deceptively ballsy. Here was a woman who had made few changes her whole life and suddenly takes a trip to Greece alone, where she has a brief affair and then stays long after her vacation is over while her husband waits with flowers for her to get off a plane at the airport and resume their life together. Claire has little in common with Shirley, who feels like a much more subdued character but the one thing they both defy are the normative philosophical stakes of their decisions. Shirley's decision to take her husband back at the end is left in the air as the film shows them having a glass of wine together on the beach but we know damn well that the decision to do so or not, is hers – not his. Much to the shock of her children earlier, Shirley had made the decision to go on vacation alone and now she's deciding the life she wants. Claire, rather than force herself to forgive Frank at the very end – or go to therapy to learn how – decides that no one is going to dictate that decision for her. Maybe she will, maybe she won't but either way, she's finally in charge. Which brings me to *Little Miss Sunshine* by Michael Arndt, who emphasizes the importance of philosophical stakes.

Michael Arndt claims there are not two, but three types of stakes in a good film: External, Internal, and Philosophical. And for a film to have impact, all three must exist, and be intertwined. In the Ensemble tragi-comedy film *Little Miss Sunshine*, Olive is a plain but exuberant eight-year-old girl who dreams of winning a beauty pageant. It's the most important thing in the world to her. But when she finally gets to the pageant, she comes to the realization that she is not pageant material because her father has expressed fear that she will experience humiliation. The final scene culminates when she struggles with her decision to; 1) go on stage and be ridiculed (because she doesn't fit the norm), 2) bail at the last minute (and let society

dictate her worth), or 3) tell herself what other people think doesn't matter (be authentic) and do it anyway but with a different attitude. Ignoring what society dictates would be what Arndt calls the philosophical stakes of the story. Throughout the story, we are privy to tensions that exist when someone does not fit society's standard of beauty. Olive represents that we are all beautiful in our own way when we are authentic. Olive goes on stage, defies society's standards and does the strip tease dance her coke-snorting grandfather taught her before he died. Underdog values win, Olive achieves her external goal of performing in a big pageant, and her internal goal of self-esteem is intact. In *WYG*, Claire's external stakes revolve around her success as a life coach, her internal stakes are that she must face her demons, and the philosophical stakes revolve around society's pressure to forgive (because that's what good people do), versus the underdog value, which is to honor herself. The most valuable aspect of studying *Little Miss Sunshine* was that it helped to consolidate my decision that Claire cannot forgive Frank at the end. I went through every scenario prior to coming to that decision. The first time I wrote it she told him off at the funeral and was furious, the next time she forgave him reluctantly, then she forgave him for her son's sake, then because it was the right thing to do. Then she didn't at the funeral but forgave him weeks later as she stood over his grave. None of them felt right. I could not end the story with Claire blowing up because that would have repeated what she had done in her interview and begged the question of whether she had grown at all. Though she had to feel empowered the way she did then, (when her gut reaction to Jasmine's question was authentic), this time she had to come full circle and *not* forgive Frank *consciously*. She had to OWN it – the way Olive owned that dance. And even though Claire had a painful exchange with Matt afterwards, it wasn't because she felt bad for not forgiving Frank – she had made her peace with that– it was because it hadn't occurred to her, that Matt was hurting too.

Bridesmaids – I’m going to say it – is one of my all-time favorite comedies. The story is simple: Down-on-her-luck Annie, starts to unwittingly wreck Lillian’s wedding plans (her best friend), when she becomes jealous of Rose, (the new friend that Lillian has made). Some scenes are unforgettable (like crapping your pants in a wedding dress) and it has a loveable, train-wreck of a main character. But Annie’s compulsion to prove herself better than Helen is what really drives the story. And although some of her behaviour is cringe-worthy, one can’t help but feel for her – like, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” All women have been in her shoes; feeling unworthy, dreams falling apart, losing a best friend, moving back in with your parents in your 40’s (or maybe that’s just me). But the point is, she’s relatable. And although she takes it pretty far – like destroying a giant cookie at the bridal shower, we’re still gunning for her to get her act together. One of the struggles I had with Claire, was making her relatable. Not everyone has experienced the trauma she had, but most people have felt betrayed, disappointed, alone, abandoned or ignored. If I made her too much of a cynic, the movie became too dark and Claire’s actions could be construed as mean. What one reader thought was funny and relatable (due to his own history), was “too much” to another – and they were referring to the same scene. No matter what, Claire had to be relatable. Keeping this standard in mind helped me to find balance in my script regarding what Claire could and could not do when in denial.

Brittany Runs a Marathon was invaluable in demonstrating how there are consequences for bad behaviour – especially if your protagonist’s inner journey is to learn how to be kind, noble, and grateful for things – like friends. But Brittany is continually negative, cynical, and cruel, and pushes away the people who love her the most. I didn’t much like her, truth be told. But her character arc was true to the core. And in good scripts, nobody gets a free pass. Brittany alienates everyone in her life (or pushes them away) and is forced to finally deal with her stuff when she is

injured and can't run in the marathon. Her road to redemption goes on for a full year until the next marathon, when she finally takes help that is offered when injured so she can finish the race, and accepts the love that is given to her. What I learned from this film, is that there have to be consequences for your protagonist – and not just external ones (like Brittany who injures herself) – there have to be emotional ones. She had to feel enough rejection to realize that something had to change. In earlier drafts, everyone forgave Claire far too easily or even supported her when she made bad decision. No one was calling her out until I changed the trajectory. Claire ended up alone – like Brittany – because it was her responsibility to figure her stuff out. Eventually, everyone walks away from her- her agent, her son, her love interest, and even her cat. Because it would take enormous loss, for stubborn Claire to realize that what she was going wasn't working.

These films were my life raft. When I was struggling with notes, I turned to them and analysed why those stories flowed and mine did not. Trying to fix something that's wrong without knowing what it is, is like playing darts in the dark. Once in a while you get lucky, but you'll never hit a bullseye. I will always be grateful for the work that came before me, and the scriptwriters that shone a light in the darkness so that I could see my script more clearly.

CLOSING REMARKS

This proved to be an incredible journey of self-exploration as much as one of writing. I can't decide if the story morphed as I did over the last few years, or if it was the other way around. All I know is that my life and was completely intertwined in it. There wasn't a day that went by when I didn't think about it or contemplate what I was doing or how I could make it better or even wonder why I was so stuck and by so doing justify letting it go for a while. In other words, *even when I wasn't writing, I was writing* (as someone once said). I also know I will never again write another story this close to home. But I am grateful for having done so at least once, because it taught me so much about myself and the writing process and I will be able to take this knowledge with me into future endeavors with a great deal more confidence than I had coming into the program. It is now forever part of my DNA.

I also feel fortunate to have done the course part of the program prior to the pandemic. Interacting with other artists became a joy; watching them work with ideas, wandering the halls, shooting their scripts, all inspired me. And it made me realize that there is a creative community out there that strives for expression and lives for it, in spite of the challenges they face, the country they come from, or the circumstances in their lives because it *is* who they are. It was a privilege to be part of that and to finally acknowledge for the first time in my life that I too, am an artist first and foremost. As a student from the theatre department once told me:

"At some point you have to realize that you are an artist, and that is enough."

She was right.

Regardless of what happens from here on out, I will always be a writer and that is enough.

Thank-you.

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