

Zen and the Art of Enjoying the Last Laugh

by Roz Warren

“How do you manage to remain so cheerful? “ people ask. “Your job can be so stressful, and yet you're always smiling. What's your secret?”

It isn't that I was born a perpetually happy camper, or that I've finally found the right meds. (Not that there's anything wrong with that.)

It's because I'm a writer.

I work at a public library. Everyone is welcome, from polite, friendly reasonable folks to hotheads, scoundrels and absolute lunatics. Our regulars include not only moms, toddlers and retirees, but folks who take orders from their toasters and a dude who claims that he can read your future by examining your feet. At the end of the day, do my friends want to hear about the adorable tots who enjoyed my story time or the pleasant people whose reference questions I answered?

Of course not! They want to hear about my run-ins with “toaster man” and “foot dude.” Because challenging encounters make for good stories. Or, to paraphrase (and slightly distort) Nietzsche: What doesn't kill you gives you great material.

I used to endure my problematic moments with the public. Now I cherish each one. Why? Because I can turn them into stories.

Yesterday a woman went ballistic when I refused to cash a hundred dollar bill so she could pay a 25 cent fine. An hour later, an elderly

gent called me a string of unprintable names because I wouldn't let him check out "Dora The Explorer" (to watch with his grand daughter) until he paid us the \$90 he owed us. I could take these little flare-ups in stride, not because I'm emotionally made of Teflon, but because I've learned to experience life not as a hapless victim, but as a humor writer.

When things go well, I enjoy them. When things go to hell, I write about them.

(By the way, Grandpa Putz did return later to pay the whopping fine. But not to apologize.)

You don't have to be a writer to play this game. Telling a story about a crappy experience so that you come out on top is something anyone can do.

Has anything happened to you within recent memory that made you want to weep, scream, roll your eyes or throttle someone? For a normal person, that's a bad day. But for a writer it's story fodder.

Readers adore conflict. (As long as it isn't happening to them.) The more exasperating the experience for you, the more readers (or your friends) will enjoy hearing about it.

Next time you're talking back to Julie, Amtrak's automated agent, or your boss is hollering at you for something that isn't your fault, consider the silver lining: give this the right spin and your friends will die laughing when you tell them about it.

So what's the right spin? As your boss continues to blather, you might think about how you can "punch up" his rant (and your response thereto) to emphasize how gracious, sane and long-suffering you are, and how bat-shit crazy he is. You're not Lois Lane and this isn't the 6 o'clock news-- feel free to embellish it a little. Exaggerate for comic effect. The sky's the limit!

Not only that, but when you tell the story later, you'll be able to include all the snappy retorts and devastating zingers you come up with after the fact.

I'm not talking about tragedy. Leave that Shakespeare or Eudora Welty. I'm referring to the story-telling goldmine that is everyday frustration and annoyance.

Entertaining people with a story isn't just fun. It's good for your mental health. Talking about something that's driving you nuts enables you to vent, which will make you feel better, and to shape the material, which lets you regain some control over the situation.

Can good times make great stories too? Absolutely. I've published essays about my son's Bichon Frise-themed wedding, the hilarious colonoscopy mix tape a pal just made, and the time my sister and I got an upgrade to first class on a flight to Chicago.

But I also coped with my sweetie's window-rattling snoring by publishing a humor piece about it in the "Christian Science Monitor."

One thing I've learned as a writer is that there's nothing more satisfying -- for both you and your audience -- than a well-told revenge story. Getting back at somebody who has put you through hell (or, at least heck) is especially gratifying.

I was once kept waiting for close to an hour in a chilly examination room at a doctor's office, wearing the usual flimsy cotton gown. When the doc finally showed up, he was rushed, perfunctory, and totally unapologetic about my long wait.

I left with the antibiotic prescription I needed. But I also left feeling angry and humiliated.

When I got home, I wrote “Outpatient,” available on Fictionaut!) a short story about a woman who endures the same experience, but I added a plot twist which enabled her to triumph over the situation. Not only did I feel better after giving that uncaring physician his comeuppance, if only in fiction, but the first magazine I sent “Outpatient” to grabbed it and sent me a check.

The story has since appeared in two anthologies, and is currently included in med school course materials aimed at helping doctors-to-be better relate to their patients. My little story not only enabled me to let off steam and made me some money, but it could stop a few future docs from being as terse and snotty with their patients as that doctor was to me.

Which is so much better than if I'd just gone home and stewed about the experience.

When “Outpatient” was published, did I send a copy to my doc? With a little note saying “Thanks for the inspiration!” And did that little gesture put a big fat smile on my face?

What do you think?

