

Making Friends with Pandemonium:

***Four Things I Learned Running Rivers—That Help Me Now as a Novelist—and As A Human* by William McGinnis**

In the course of leading river trips and training river guides for 38 years, I learned a ton about life, people, and myself—all of which influence my writing now. Some particular nuggets:

One: I'm Smarter When I'm Asleep

The office side of managing a rafting company with over 200 river guides spread out over more than a dozen rivers frequently had me feeling scattered and overwhelmed.

What saved me was sleep: short naps and full nights of it. I went to sleep reeling, beset by problems. I somehow woke up with a fresh perspective, often with solutions... sometimes with brilliant outside-the-box resolutions to seemingly unsolvable dilemmas. For example, the entire idea for Beaver Point Campground came to me in a dream.

To this day, when confronted with a plot problem—or any sort of dilemma—it's when I'm asleep in the middle of the night or taking a short nap that solutions very often pour fourth—solutions that often feel almost archetypal—from someplace deep. I could not have written this article, for instance, without consulting the profound intuitive wellspring of my unconscious.

Two: Make Friends with Pandemonium

We all have an "I'm going to die button"—closely related to the fight or flight response—that can be triggered by all sorts of things—even something small: You falling out of the boat. Someone else falling out of the boat. Even someone else falling out of some other boat. Or off the river: Encounters with your

boss. Pitching a big client. Tackling a difficult writing project. Etc. Etc.

Myriad times a day, throughout modern life, your heart races. You're filled with adrenaline. You gotta act, gotta cope, but what do you do? In a word, you're overwhelmed.

Making friends with pandemonium means cultivating an inner self-awareness—an awareness that tells you when you're overwhelmed, when your “I'm gonna die button” is triggered. The closer the friendship you build with the pandemonium beast, the quicker you recognize its scary visage when it appears.

When you're triggered—and you're aware that you are triggered—in rapid order you can acknowledge the overwhelm, set the feeling aside, and swiftly focus on dealing with the situation.

In a sense, this inner awareness lifts you up, allowing you to see your overwhelm as though from above. You have it. It does not have you.

From this higher perspective, you see that the overwhelm is just a small part of you. You gain access to the rest of yourself, the majority of yourself, the whole you, which is better able to cope, to take action, to find solutions.

Three: The Really Big Picture

On one hand, we live in a world overflowing with natural beauty and each of us has infinite, nearly God-like potential. On the other hand, at the very same time, there is so much sadness, fear, hatred and pain in the world that it can make the beauty and the infinite potential seem empty, hollow.

This seems to be the human condition, with no easy solution. But—and this is key—an awareness of this Really Big Picture highlights and makes obvious the importance of kindness to self and others, appreciation of self and others. Which—blessedly—provides a sort of solution, a way forward.

Of course, when writing fiction, it's best not to preach or beat the reader over the head with instructions on how to live. But when the three core concepts of the Really Big Picture—the beauty and potential in the world—the sadness, fear and pain—and the importance of kindness—are implicitly and seamlessly woven into the underlying fabric of a story, the result can be enriching and uplifting.

Four: What Is the Situation? Where Are We Going? How Do We Get There?

In any situation, but especially in emergencies, these three questions make for peak performance: What Is the Situation? Where Are We Going? How Do We Get There?

When implicitly embedded into fiction, these three questions help create upbeat, life-is-good stories even as the main characters grapple with extreme challenges such as drug cartels, terrorism, and Communist China bringing America to its knees.

These three questions orient us toward positive solutions and away from less productive quagmires like wallowing in victimhood and assigning blame. They guide us out of and away from an "I'm going to die" state of mind. They prompt us to see what is, and open us to seeing the choices before us.

As long as we realize we have choice, we have agency, and being upbeat comes naturally. The key is to realize and be aware that we are not helpless victims of our own nature, of any "system," or of outside forces.

As long as we are alive and aware that we have choices, we can make the most of any situation—and, importantly, we can do our part to help kindness triumph over the darkside. As long as we have choice – and are aware that we have choice – we are not victims. The key is awareness. Awareness is freedom!

Of course, the challenge and adventure of putting all this into practice is ongoing and never complete—at least on this side of the grave. Welcome to being human, to being alive!

P.S: I would just add: When I die, wherever I wind up, my intention is to ask: What is the situation? Where am I going? How do I get there? Unless, of course, I find that I am already there!

To learn more about Bill's philosophy and books, visit his author's website: WilliamMcGinnis.com