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Get Big, Stay Small

By Noelle Sterne

The mall [Starbucks](#) was bustling. The line snaked out way beyond the wide atrium almost to the entrance of the babyGap at the periphery. The espresso jets were hissing, syrup dispensers spurting, whipped cream cans squirting, [cash registers](#) clanking, and employees sweating and tripping over each other behind the narrow counter. Their barks of "Your order" and "Next" rang out through the impatient line.

A successful Starbucks, to be sure, as I watched from my nearby should-be-writing table. The activity looked like an assembly line, devoid of human contact except for order taking, change-giving, or drink-size clarifying. This wasn't the Starbucks of first vision, where Chairman Schultz declared, "We're not in the business of filling bellies but of filling souls."^[1] That statement rang inside me, and it heralded a parallel for writers.

As I witnessed the feeding-- or drinking-- frenzy before me, I realized his noble dream may be fast dripping away. With Starbucks' unprecedented success and profitability, there seems little chance of regaining the dream, especially with Schultz's addenda to his vision. At last count, 13,500 stores are brewing, and he's aiming in a few years for 40,000 worldwide and a tripling of annual sales.^[2]

To his credit, though, he's aware of the dangers of such grandiose plans. In a recent interview, he mused, "How do you get big and stay small?" This is a question we writers should be prepared for. Schultz's real goal, he said, is to preserve intimacy with success, to keep the "romance and theatre" of the "coffee experience"-- as we seek to keep our enchantment with writing and transmit our fervor and honesty to our readers. He acknowledged, "If you grow, you lose soul. Some have accused us of this already."^[3]

As I witnessed the laboring kids behind the counter and the stoic faces on the ever-lengthening line, I couldn't help but agree with his accusers. In fact, he took a more blatant step to counteract the loss of "soul." In early 2007, he issued a strong memo to his top executives, warning them the "Starbucks experience" has been watered down, that some stores are "cookie cutter" and "no longer have the soul of the past." He urged, "Let's get back to the core."^[4] As we achieve more writing success, this message is for us too.

It's a knotty dilemma-- starting small, excited, hopeful, and then, reaching the dream, growing big and rich and successful, with the almost inevitable result of assembly-line impersonality and thinking. Referring to that fateful memo, Starbucks senior vice president Michelle Gass echoed Schultz's comment: "We're constantly-- I don't want to say battling--

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but we don't want to be that big company that's corporate and slick." To keep that crucial "coffee *joie de vivre* alive inside Starbucks"^[6] is a tall-- or should I say *venti*-- order.

And how do we as writers, having published even a little, keep that crucial writing *joie de vivre*? Many of us have experienced the unhappy transition. At first, flushed with thrilled anticipation, you write your heart out, sacrifice much, and with your first acceptance, like your first love or first latté, you scream, shout, shake, and praise God. You wake early, with vigor and joy, and keep tearing into fresh works and publishing them. But one day, you realize that with each new editorial nod, you're a little less enthralled, until, horribly, when you read the latest acceptance e-mail, you barely even smile. And you think only of grinding out yet another piece and how the hell to fit it into your schedule.

Children's author Marianne Mitchell captured this paradox with palpable nostalgia, "Oh, to be a newbie again! . . . I remember those early days when hope fluttered around me like magic butterflies." She admitted, "Somewhere along the road to success I had lost the sparkle-- the newbie sparkle-- that dances around beginning authors who are just so darn delighted to get a rejection with a real editor's ink signature!"^[7]

Another writer also candidly attacked this dilemma. After years of writing for her own enjoyment, Mimi Greenwood Knight began to sell her essays and articles. She kept getting assignments, completing them, and making more money than she ever imagined possible from writing. But soon she was churning out topics that didn't interest her "in the least."^[8]

Other writers have had similar experiences. A highly successful magazine writer confessed that five current articles started with the exact same lead. A short story author was reminded in her writers' group that her descriptions of characters' facial expressions, whether men or women, had repeated themselves in three of her last four stories.

In the writer's version of Schultz's cookie cutter complaint and corporate slickness, we write about things that don't interest us, repeat the same stale techniques, treat subjects superficially, and produce too-facile, formularized writing. We slip into our favorite approaches and phrases like a comforting bathrobe. Each of us knows, in the solitary dark, how much we succumb to these easy ways out and whether, by the last line, we feel satisfied or cheapened. Each of us knows whether we're denying the quality and depth we're capable of and instead pandering to the bottomless well of desire to see our name in print and revel in reeling off an endless string of magazine names we've published in. Each of us knows when we've lost our writing soul.

The Starbucks I was looking at confirmed this parallel. The order takers, despite their contrived romantic title of "barista," didn't care in the least about giving you the "romance" of a "coffee experience"-- part of Schultz's definition of "filling souls."^[9] They only wanted to get through their shifts and get their paychecks so they could get through college. Schultz's original vision is unfaultable, but when we reach even a crumb of the success we've always craved, how do we keep from simply cranking it out and instead stay small, excited, humble, true to our writing selves?

Mimi came up with some answers. One night, with no new work to bring to her writing group, she scrounged in old files and found some early pieces she'd written when her late motherhood was new. As much for her own sanity as aid to others, she'd written essays for new and frantic mothers like herself.

She realized these pieces were *good*-- and painful worlds apart from her more recent ones.



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"I'd forgotten how to write from my gut. . . . I'd forgotten I had something to say. Where was my message? Where was my opinion? Where was my passion? I'd abandoned that other mom long ago, the one I'd wanted to help."^[10] Finally, not caring whether it was what editors wanted to see or would pay for, she wrote an essay to that other bewildered mother out there, the one who still needed help. Mimi regained her passion, zest, and center.

Please don't misunderstand. Nothing at all wrong with wanting recognition and payment for your work, exchanging chummy e-mails with editors, and thrilling at getting Christmas cards from their publications. Nothing wrong with wanting more of the same, finding new markets, having editors call you for new assignments, selling more, and receiving real checks (ongoing miracle) for your writing. Nothing wrong with building your credits, even if it means writing some pieces that aren't exactly what you'd choose in your ideal writing life. Lord knows, I want it all too.

But as we get bigger in all these ways, returning to the writer's version of Schultz's question, how do we stay small? How do we stay true to the original vision and passion that started us writing in the first place? How do we stay connected to our writing, willing to lavish it with the care we once did, no matter how long that paragraph takes, and giving it inordinate time with joy? How do we keep, or regain, our soul?

Mimi's questions refocus our attention and emphasis. Where's your message, your passion? Other questions arise: How can you rephrase your initial desire to write? Do you want to help people at a certain stage, like Mimi with other young, overwhelmed mothers? Do you want to help other writers? Or couples, loners, model train lovers? Do you want to tell people about health, relationships, saving for big-ticket items, God? Or in your writing do you want to discover, illuminate, astonish, promote the mundane or marvelous?

Only you know, and I encourage you to ask yourself such questions, listen inside for the answers, and write down what you hear. A few years ago, when I'd finally achieved more publishing, I was inexplicably feeling worse, not looking forward to going to my desk, and lamenting inside that even with this small measure of success I'd lost the delight of writing. One night as I fell asleep, I cried out for a solution. Near dawn, I awoke to an inner voice. It told me, "Capture the essence." This was the message I needed, and I almost wept. I printed it on a card and taped it below my computer screen in easy view, and this message never fails to remind and replenish me.

Sometimes we need more than a sentence. Use these additional suggestions to help you regain your writing *joie de café*.

Let your mind go back to a time you really enjoyed writing. Maybe it was two years ago, last month, or yesterday. Recall the physical setting, your clothes, what you were using to write.

What were you working on? What do you remember about this project or piece-- its form, length, development? What impelled you to write about this? As you reconstruct the physical environment, you'll remember too your thoughts and emotions.

How did you feel working on this project? Captivated, enthralled, fascinated? Almost in love? Maybe a little nervous? Full with the weight of what you felt compelled to express?

Trust your mind to remember. Don't try to force the memories or feelings. They haven't been lost. If you're quiet and patient, they'll emerge.

Re-experience and replay the feelings. As you do, you'll start to sense something-- excitement, desire, a physical sensation, a word, phrase, or image. Whatever arises, let it in and let yourself feel it totally.

You've succeeded in coming back to that "small" center, whatever the bigness of your achievement. You've reawakened that core that impels your best, most honest writing.

Then listen, like Mimi did, as it tells you what to write. Make no judgments, build no expectations, search out no markets. Markets, and publication, will come later. For now, bask in your reignited, renewed writing soul, and just write. Whenever you need to, return to those associations and feelings; they'll always replenish you, as they did me. And you'll have learned, as maybe Howard Schultz and Starbucks haven't yet, how to get big and stay small.

[1] *Howard Schultz and Starbucks*, DVD, Biography Channel, No. AAE-103530, A&E Television Networks, aired September 25, 2007.

[2] Burt Helm, "Saving Starbucks' Soul, Business Week, April 9, 2007, http://www.businessweek.com/print/magazine/content/07_15/b4029070.htm?chan+gl

[3] *Howard Schultz and Starbucks*.

[4] Melissa Allison, "Starbucks Must Find Lost 'Soul,' Schultz Says," *Seattle Times*, February 24, 2007, <http://archives.seattletimes.nswsource.com>. The memo was distributed on February 14, 2007.

[5] Helm, "Saving Starbucks' Soul."

[6] Helm, "Saving Starbucks' Soul."

[7] Marianne Mitchell, "Finding Joy Again," *Once Upon A Time*, Spring 2007, p. 16.

[8] Mimi Greenwood Knight, "Writing for Her," *Absolute Write Newsletter*, July 25, 2007, www.absolutewrite.com

[9] *Howard Schultz and Starbucks*.

[10] Knight, "Writing for Her."

Writer, editor, writing [coach](#), and academic consultant, Noelle Sterne holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University in English and Comparative Literature. She has published fiction, essays, poems, and writer's craft articles in many magazines and [online resources](#), including Absolute Write, ByLine, Children's Book Insider, Writer's Digest special issues, Writers' Journal, The Writer, and, most recently, the [2008 Novel and Short Story Writer's Market](#). Her children's book, [Tyrannosaurus Wrecks: A Book of Dinosaur Riddles](#) (HarperCollins) was in print for 18 years and featured in the first dinosaur show of the PBS television children's series "Reading Rainbow." In 2006, a short story won an award and was published in the [CrossTIME Anthology, Vol. V](#). She continues to write and publish motivational and how-to articles for writers, with additional pieces scheduled in national magazines for 2007 and beyond. Current nonfiction projects include a book based on her academic consulting practice, [Grad U: How to Survive and Succeed in Graduate School, Get Your Degree, and Ease the Trip for Yourself and Everyone Who Has to Live with You](#); a book specifically for children's writers, [Give Great Children's Presentations](#); and a collection of essays for all writers, [First You Find Your Desk: Start Writing and Keep Writing with Less Agony and More Joy](#).



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