



The Troll and the Bully

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Have you cultivated your relationships with your inner bully, troll, or monster?

Might it be worthwhile to check in with your own versions of the inner bully, troll, and/or monster? Might it be an interesting exercise to initiate a conversation?

Have you cultivated your relationships with your inner bully, troll, or monster? In my writer handbook, **FLOAT • Becoming Unstuck for Writers**, I include a tool named “Objection, Your Honor!” that acknowledges the presence of our own inner mean voices. The tool recommends scripting replies to the

mean voices, and keeping them handy for when you are feeling susceptible.

For instance, to that classic challenge, *Who do you think you are?*, one of my clients created little signs he keeps posted in his workspace. Each sign contains the nasty question – and his response to it, in this case, “I’m the one writing this book.” A novelist I met got excited about saying back to her bully, “Who do I think I am? I’m the author of a four-volume saga. The first book has been well-received, and I’m already done with the first draft of book two, that’s who I think I am.”

We can engage the mean inner voices - give them a seat at the creative table.

I’ve been exploring this further, in conversations with clients and fellow writers, and continue to learn about these inner voices. I’ve come to see that we can engage with these voices — give them a seat at the creative table. While it’s handy to keep our swift, pointed replies handy for use in a crunch, I recommend setting aside calmer moments now and then to initiate a dialogue.

Here are sample vignettes of imaginary conversations with the troll and the bully, followed by a sample re-write of the second one.

Auntie Troll

She launches herself into the library and commandeers the one comfortable chair, opposite you. Adjusting herself and her shawls and scarves, she begins, with her sweet, insinuating voice:



“You look busy, dear. Too busy. What’s your hurry? Where’s the fire? Speaking of fire, there’s a lovely tea shop nearby with a fireplace open to two sides. We’re sure to get a table there. Wouldn’t it be nice to treat yourself to a cozy afternoon? Surely this so-called work you obsess on can wait. Who’s paying you for this, anyway?”

“It’s creative writing. I haven’t sold it yet. At the moment I’m writing it.”

“Ah. I see. So let’s pack up your things, dear, and head to the tea shop. You won’t begrudge your auntie a cup of tea will you?”

Powerless to oppose her, you notice yourself packing up your notebook and laptop. As you hold the door open for her, you wonder how she was able to derail your writing session with just a couple of sentences.

This is troll behavior, intruding on your work session, diverting you with promises of comfort and ease, and, for good measure, adding a nice dollop of straight-up guilt.



Here’s another vignette.

The Bully

He’s there when you arrive. Lying in wait, it feels like. He speaks first, issuing the challenge.

“There you are.”

“Am I late?” You realize, as soon as you speak, that you’ve blundered already by showing weakness.

“Late? Who’s to say? This is all so free form, who can say if you’re on time? Or years too late? Can you look me in the eye and promise me this project of yours is ever going to see the light of day?”

He looks like he’s enjoying this.

“Uh.” You feel so useless. Where’s the energy you had ten minutes ago?

“Right. Moving on. And if it does — say, for example, you get it printed yourself — can you explain to me how it’s going to be seen by anyone who doesn’t already know you?”

“Uh.” Well, he’s got you there.

“Say no more, buddy. Say no more.”

You exit, looking nearly as dejected and discouraged as you are feeling. No more writing for you, on this day or the next several days, as it turns out.

So far, this is a classic bullying session, which may even ring a few uncomfortably familiar notes.

The Bully 2.0

Now we’ll bring the scene in for a re-write, to turn the scene into an actual conversation.

Bully: “There you are.”

You: “Hey, good to see you. I’ve been wanting to have a chat.”

“You *have*? You want to talk to *me*?”

“Yeah. I’ve been thinking maybe we have more in common than I thought we did.”

“Well, yeah. Maybe. I mean, I am a part of you.”

“You raise an interesting point. I’ve always thought of you as the bully, this character from outside who somehow got inside my head and exists to disrupt my creative flow by questioning and diminishing all my ideas.”

“Wow. That hurts.”

“Excuse me? Are you telling me you have feelings?”

“I’m part of you. Do you have feelings? You do the math.”

“Well, that’s — a new perspective. Uh, what do you want me to call you? Do you have a name?”

“Call me BB.”

“Tell me more, BB. I need to understand how it is that you and I are on the same side.”

He sighs, whether more from relief or impatience it’s hard to tell.

“All right. I’m going to overlook – for now – the fact that you have maintained a hostile attitude and basically wished I

would just go away. That said, I will now explain how this works. Pay attention. I don't intend to repeat myself."

"I'm listening."

"Let me ask you this — why do you think I ask you about whether your project will ever see the light of day?"

"To make me feel small and inadequate and sap my energy?"

"Okay, that's one interpretation, I guess....try this on for size, instead. First of all, in case you aren't aware, I've been with you all along. Ever since you've been here. Since before you could talk, or form sentences."

"Huh. How is that rele—"

"So it's relevant because it occurs to me that we may need to update my settings."

"Your settings? What are you? A robot? A chip implanted in my brain? What the —?"

"Basically, you sent me away a long long time ago."

"I did what?"

"I can see you need some deep background before this can make sense. You think of me as your bully because you effectively froze me into a role that I played when you were a kid. Technically, when we were a kid."

"Froze you into a role?"



“Okay, so remember when life at school got really hard?”

“Which time? The playground bully, or the weird neighbor, or the monster teacher? Or something else?”

“I was thinking of the playground bully. what was that – third grade?”

“Yeah. Sounds right.”

“Didn’t have a lot of defenses then, huh? Didn’t want to involve the parents, who had their own problems. Kept switching schools, so no time to make close friends.”

“It was a lonely time.”

“Agreed. So my job became keeping you alert to danger. I was protecting us. Better to be ready when the next bad thing happened.”

“Be prepared, and all that.”

“Right. So I think you didn’t like how it felt, having me on the lookout like that all the time. So you put me in a corner of the attic somewhere and shut the door. And ever since then, all I’ve been able to say, or at least all you’ve been able to hear me say, are warnings of gloom and doom and failure. There was a time when that was helpful. I’d like you to understand that.”

“This is weird. But yeah, I can get that when I was a defenseless kid you were helping me out by looking out for trouble. It’s just that nowadays, that’s not what I need. From anyone —

part of me or friend or stranger — anyone. What I need now is support of another kind.”

“What kind of support?”

“If we went back to the first question you asked me today — do I really think my writing project will ever see the light of day — could we look at things differently? Like, if you want to look out for me nowadays, ask me what I’m doing to cultivate my author platform and build buzz about the book before it’s even done. Encourage me to become a better literary citizen, keeping in touch with the people I know and want to know. Help me to venture into uncomfortable situations, introduce myself to authors I respect, post book reviews online, link to other writers and publications in my blog and newsletters, all of that.”

“Hmmm. I guess that makes sense. You know more about this writing and publishing stuff than I do. I’ll need to get up to speed, but I get the gist. Looking for existential threats isn’t the order of the day now, is it?”

“Nope. Not helpful.”

“Let’s do this again, okay?”

“It’s a deal, BB.”

—end scene—

Might it be worthwhile to check in with your own versions of the inner bully, troll, and/or monster? Might it be an interesting exercise to initiate a conversation?

Just as with the bully and the troll in these vignettes, you may be able to spot your versions of these characters delivering some script lines that are in urgent need of rewriting. And who better for that task than a writer?

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Special thanks to [Artie Wu](#) for his way of framing conversations with our "inner board members."