

IGNITION NUMBER TWENTY-SIX

A Tinderbox of Attitudes

“Mommy, he started it!” . . . is an attitude toward life. It’s a perspective. And a valid one. One of many. “Let’s look at this reasonably” is another. But we miss perspectives driving down the Highway of Life. Or we forget them. Then we stumble upon them again, by accident, on the busy street, (“What’s your take on this, Bill?”) or in a crazy person who calls us on the phone (“The Devil is going to get you!”).

These perspectives, slants on real life, what are they? They are permissions. Permissions to see things a certain way, to speak from a point of view. Take this one: “I am a glorious shining example of all that is good about the human race.” Now who’s gonna give themselves permission to speak from that place? But nonetheless, every once in a while, we feel it.

We say, “She’s got an attitude.” In fact, that is good. We need attitudes. Lots of them: “I’m not your mother,” or “I’m in control,” or “It’s not *fair!*”¹ Each of these are aspects of real life we usually forget when we’re writing. We miss the vista points as we speed down the road. This time around I’m gonna toss out a hail-storm of attitudes, like a batting machine and you’re gonna smack at them, one after the other.

TRY IT!:

Again, topicality. You are writing a particular character in your story, perhaps, and you can’t get her right. Have her stop

¹ Children’s voices are perfect for this because they learn to communicate these basic, undiluted human passions and approaches to the world, ones that become covered-over by truisms, polite abstentions, filligree, upgrades, new and improved features. But underneath this the child’s tantrum mind, or pure “I wanna” mind, or pure cuddly mind can reconnect us to the substrata of our drives.

into the vintage clothing store, or the changing room at Lord and Taylor's. Have her try on a buncha attitudes. See which fit.

Or, you just cannot figure out (and you've really been thinking it over) whether to move or not. Or whether to go back to school. Or whether to stick out your job which you hate for two more years to get the benefits. Or not.

And we can tell *stories* too; we're not limited to topics. Stories of my first pregnancy. Or someone I love has gone insane. Or we met an orphan girl on an Indian train platform. Or the story of my massive love affair. Or I was blinded in one eye by a cougar attack. (*Whoa*, where did that one come from, Andy? Don't ask me, call the subconscious complaint line.)

Or perhaps just invite the mercurial goddess of chance in, and just open the newspaper, find a headline, and write about that. You could even steal a topic from an English teacher or a text book. They seem to have plenty. It's against my religion to give you assignments.

Here's how it works. Below, I've got a cauldron of stances, a gumbo of attitudes, a library of slants. Each has a number. Once

The prismatic psyche emerges through plentiful permissions.

you've got your title, you choose seven random numbers between one and forty six in any random order, and write them down just under your title, like this "31, 11, 42, 2, 5, 24, 46." (No peeking first!) At first you start writing, any which way, for a minute or three, and then turn the next page of this book, and go through your number list, and write from each attitude, for about four minutes each.

Got your numbers? Let's go.

1. "Evil is present in this world, and we must battle it!"
2. "There is no answer to this puzzle."
3. "I feel an incredible peaceful feeling in my heart just now."
4. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

Disagree with what you just wrote

6. "We have angered the gods."
7. "It's *capitalism* that's the problem!"
8. "Follow your bliss."
9. "Mommy, he started it."
10. "Do nothing, and everything will be done."
11. "Hush little baby, don't you cry, Momma's gonna sing you a lullaby."
12. "There was nothing I could do about it."
13. "A pox on both of their houses!"
14. "But I thought he was a *nice* man."
15. "The possibilities are endless!"
16. "I've heard it all before."

Disagree with what you just wrote

17. "It's society's fault."
18. "Do that some *more*. I like it!"
19. "No pain, no gain!"
20. "The timing was wrong."
21. "I *know* I'm right!"
22. "The wise would disapprove."
23. "If only things were different!"
24. "Let's look at this in more detail."
25. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."
26. "It isn't *about* you."
27. "It'll never work!"
28. "Mommy, can I have more, *please*!"
29. "You poor *thing*!"

Disagree with what you just wrote

30. "She was doing the best she could."
31. "That's it. I've had it. I'm madder than hell and I'm not gonna take it anymore."
32. "You can't just throw money at the problem."
33. "My decision is final."
34. "I didn't want to say this, but you are forcing me . . ."
35. "We've forgotten to look at things in the long term."

36. "It's not *fair!*"
37. "The universe is in control and we need to just let it do its thing."
38. "Mark my words . . ."
39. "Like I'm *so* sure!"
40. "It's all my fault."
41. "We've got to have some *standards* here!"
42. "I am a shining example of all that is beautiful in this world."
43. "Let's Party!"

QUESTIONS FOR THE CURIOUS:

It's all about surprise. Trying to get something you didn't expect. So the question is, did you get surprise? Did you discover an inner attitude you had left out in the cold?

Also, were there attitudes you fit with better than others? Was anger easier than tenderness? Was there relief in some stances? Did you feel a release in your poor strictured soul when someone finally allowed you to be a brat? Did you give yourself permission to lie?

THE MIND OF IT:

Oh, the boundaries we live under! What a trip that we don't see them until someone says, "Look! You don't have to do it that way. You can be tender." Nihilism too has its place at the table. *And I can be pathetic. And I can be righteous. And I can be distanced and austere. I can blame others. I can blame myself.*

There is not only the relief of being able to see sides of the issue or story that our habit-ridden brain had pre-emptively foreclosed, but the sheer multiplicity of possible approaches opens our relationship with the real world. Our relationship with the world is funny. Our relationship with the world is tragic. It's reasoned. There is an end to things. There is no end to things. (Yes, yes, logically speaking only one of two opposite statements can be true. But isn't it exhausting to always have to throw yourself at the locked prison door of logic? Isn't that your forehead with all those bruise marks on it?)

These askancey stances, each one fits into a niche in the environment, the environment of your inner self, and the environment of the big fat culture, our being with others. They are niches for us to use; let us use them.