

Excerpt from “How I Wrote My First Book” – Lee Denning’s Chapter

I should start at the beginning, my friends. Actually, there were two of them.

In late 2002, I’m approaching a decade birthday. Those are tough birthdays; they raise existential questions. Mine was ‘what do I really want to do when I grow up?’ To make it more difficult, that question itself is questioned by the Peter Pan reflex -- ‘do I really want to grow up?’ So here I am, sliding toward sixty. I’ve been a construction worker, student, soldier, mathematician, scientist, engineer, corporate type, entrepreneur. I’ve helped build some nuclear plants, solved some environment problems, started and built a successful consulting company. Satisfying work. Not a bad run. But a lot of the fun has gone out of the environmental business lately. The government has gotten prescriptive in its solutions; creativity has been shoved to the back of the bus. Politicians make crazy noises at each other and some of those noises even get turned into environmental regulations. Ycchh. “Thank God we don’t get all the government we pay for,” Mark Twain said. The work has become boring; I’m getting fidgety. There’s more to life, *n’est-ce pas?*

Now let’s flash back to the previous beginning. In mid-1970, I’m an Air Force officer, doing a staff job at Tan Son Nhut airbase in Saigon, during the Vietnam war. The job is neither demanding nor dangerous, and the temptation is to while away the off-duty time chasing nubile young mama-sans and drinking the native beer. The downside of the mama-sans was that a fair percentage were contagious. The downside of the native beer (called “33” or Ba Muoi Ba in Vietnamese) was that you really didn’t know what was in it, although it was generally conceded to have a high formaldehyde content. I’m no saint -- did a little of both. But mostly I wrote -- got about a hundred handwritten pages into a sci-fi novel. Then, after a couple of months in Saigon, I got an opportunity to go upcountry with the Army Special Forces. At this point life got a lot more interesting and I put aside those hundred pages.

So I guess you could say that -- one way or another, in one decade or another -- boredom gave birth to the book.

After Vietnam, the handwritten draft stayed put for thirty-some years, migrating progressively further downward in the attic underneath the boxes of accoutrements that time-stamp the progress of an upwardly mobile yuppie: grad school, corporate life, small business owner. Yeah, I thought about the story from time to time during those years, because it was a really good one: *aliens invade the minds of two lovers, distort their realities and pit them against each other in a struggle to the death... while the fate of humanity hangs in the balance.* But I had a life to lead... hard worker, decent spouse, good father. And though a few little karmic reminders (mostly movies -- *War of the Roses*, *Terminator 2*, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* -- probably because the story was very visual to me) would pester me from time to time, I ignored them. No time for a novel. Too busy. [*Insight #1*]. (So what’s this ‘Insight’, you ask? The basic purpose of this book is to share the creative process and experiences with prospective writers. So when it occurs to me, I’m explicitly writing down what I’ve learned writing this first book that I think may be useful to you. Some of it may not; I make no claim to represent a typical writer. These are a few brief words of useful information. Or to some folks they may just be turds. I don’t have a problem with either perception, everybody is different and vive la difference. In the absence of magazine-style

formatting that would put these 'Insights' in little boxes embedded in the text, I've placed them all at the end of the narrative. Take what's useful and forget the rest.)

Back to 2002, to the squishy decade-birthday question of what do I want to do when I grow up. *The time has come, the walrus said, to speak of many things...* I could do a lot of stuff, I tell myself. I have an open mind. But there are two important criteria: (1) the undertaking has to be highly creative; and (2) I have to be able to go to work naked. Yes, there are jobs besides writing that you can go to naked, but history has proven I'm a lousy stock-picker... and the other obvious alternative I'm getting too old and ugly for. *[Insight #2]*

Now, I suppose I have a reasonable allocation of intuition or gut-sense (mama's genes), but I'm also (as mathematician/scientist/engineer) pretty far into the rationalist camp (papa's genes). So I ponder my existential question both emotionally and with decision-analysis tools straight out of Harvard Business School. Narrow it down to two options: (1) write sci-fi, or (2) build gaming software that uses environmental issues to teach fundamental logic and critical thinking at the middle school level. Then I evaluate the options on a decision grid -- weighted criteria, the typical nerd approach. This results in an outcome of 659 points to 613, basically a tie given the subjective nature of the process. What follows then is a little more thought but essentially a mental coin flip, and I'm suddenly a novelist. Whoopee! Time to dig that sucker out of the attic!

I do, sneezing out a lot of dust until I find it. After thirty-some years, the writing is past bad and heading into horrendous. It must have decayed in the attic; I know I'm a better writer than that. The other possibility is that the formaldehyde in Ba Muoi Ba nailed too many of my brain cells in Nam. So what now? Go back to the software development option? I thumb through the manuscript's brittle pages. It's that funny old government paper, smaller than the standard 8.5 by 11. The paper's old, the writing's crummy... but by God the idea is still great, and the plot ain't bad either. *[Insight #3]* And as far as I know nobody has written anything close. *[Insight #4]*

At this point, enter the nay-sayers and devil's advocates, both internal and external. A piece of conventional wisdom for aspiring writers is that the first million words is practice. This is not unreasonable, I think at the time. After all, practice is usually what gets you to a goal. *[Insight #5]* How many notes did Stern play before doing Carnegie Hall? How many tennis strokes did Federer hit before getting to Wimbledon? But a million words is between six and eight good-length novels, I figure. Jeesh!

Fortunately there's a handy rationalization. I carefully calculate that in the course of a long professional career that I've written between five million and eight million words in technical documents. They ranged from dispassionate disclosure of research results to advocacy legal briefs that -- haha -- sometimes verged on fiction. Sure, technical writing is different than fiction, but you've still got to assemble words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, organize ideas to tell a coherent story. I figure five to eight million technical is more than equivalent to one million fictional. *[Insight #6]*

So I'm golden... back on track... gonna be a sci-fi novelist, mama! And here we've come to the end of my two beginnings: I trash the old manuscript but keep the idea.

Now... here's the middle of 'my first novel' story...

Monkey Trap is a sci-fi thriller, but it's underpinned with a number of philosophical and moral issues. Chief among these is the observation from Jimi Hendricks that only "when the power of love overcomes the love of power, will the world know peace". So, how to wrap a story around that?

In India, villagers used to trap monkeys by hollowing out a gourd. The hole in one end held a rope that was attached to a distant tree. The hole in the other end was just big enough for a monkey to work his hand into. The monkey's favorite nuts were dropped in the gourd as bait. The monkey worked his hand in to grab them, but with his fist closed couldn't pull his hand out. So he dances around at the end of a tether, madder than hell. He wants what he wants, and won't let go of the bait to pull his hand out. Thus he becomes monkey soup for the village.

There is an answer, of course: let go and save your sorry ass, my monkey friend. Or better yet, shake the nuts out of the gourd into your hand and run away laughing. But monkeys know what monkeys know... just as in us humans, it's a complex mix of genetics and learning. In the heat of the moment most monkeys get trapped. So the metaphorical question is... if you wanted to test a human, what would you use for bait?

Power.

And what would cause your trapped human to release that bait?

Love.

An interesting premise. [*Insight #7*] Worthy of a decade birthday. Worthy of some serious effort. So the project is off and running, late 2002.

I may be crazy, but I'm not stupid, so before I even start writing, I want to see if there's a template to make the writing easier. Because the story -- plot-wise -- is a series of chase scenes (and maybe also because I'm so visually-oriented), I watch *Terminator 2* six times to get a sense of structure and pacing. I take copious notes. After that sinks in enough, I begin to outline. That was my only specific preparation. No writing classes, no groups, no on-line research on how to go about writing a novel -- just jump in, and like Nike says, "just do it". [*Insight #8*]

I have a co-author in this writing business, my daughter Leanne. (Thus the pen name Lee Denning.) It was sort of an accident. In early 2003, she's in college in sunny southern California while I'm shoveling snow in Connecticut, drafting chapter 8 of *Monkey Trap* when I happen to mention it to Lee in our weekly phone chat. She gets very excited, wants to read installments as they come off my computer (a chapter per week, roughly). I say sure, just send me back your comments and ideas. She does. They're pretty good. And they get better. I tell her to write some stuff if she wants. She does. By the time we get done I figure she's written maybe a fifth of the book. Didn't help her grades much, but it's her senior year and she's graduating, so what the hell.

Here's my time breakdown for *Monkey Trap*: structure and outline -- 173 hours; write first draft - 973 hours; edit and rewrite to final manuscript -- 1173 hours. I'm not really anal-retentive, I just was curious as to how long the process actually would take, so I kept track. Add maybe twenty percent more for Lee's time. [Insight #9]

We did six edits, total. I thought that was overmuch until I discovered Mark Twain edited *Huckleberry Finn* seventeen times, without benefit of a computer and word processor, ouch! So I spend a lot of upfront time. However, I'm not suggesting any particular writing methodology here. [Insight #10]

Now, while all this novel writing is going on in 2003, mind you, I'm still running a small business. And as any small business owner will be happy to tell you, that means a *lot* of time and energy. So I tell my junior partners the plan: I'll show up two or three hours late most mornings and you guys can suck up the slack. Those lads are great partners and great friends and don't even blink... not sure what I did to deserve them, but I'm blessed. So, the writing program becomes: up early, write two to three hours, go to my day job. On the way home, hit the gym or tennis court. Late dinner. Sleep like a baby. Get up and do the same the next day. Spousal encouragement, no bitching... I'm blessed again; possibly I got something right in a prior incarnation. Weekends -- more writing, fix problems. Make time for a little fun, sex and surprise dates. Which, by the way, is important. [Insight #11]

So that's how *Monkey Trap* got written, my friends. And here we've come to the end of the middle: the manuscript is written, edited, polished, even has cover art that reflects the nature of the story, so we're ready to go. (I won't trouble you with the details of finding a publisher and promoting a book, that's a whole different ballgame.)

Now, there is an end to the novel-writing saga, but completing the first book wasn't it. So here's the end... so far, that is...

About halfway through the first draft of *Monkey Trap*, Lee and I begin to realize that -- although the tale itself comes to a clear and satisfying conclusion -- it also begs the question of what happens next. I mean, this is about the evolution of a new human species, so something has to happen next, right? We kick it around, and suddenly we've got a trilogy. [Insight #12] In our *Nova sapiens* trilogy (of which *Monkey Trap* is Book I), a long-suppressed gene is activated when our two lovers pass their monkey trap test... but the new path of human evolution is fraught with peril for the first of the new species, with only the slimmest hope of redemption for the rest of us...

In *Hiding Hand*, the eighteen-year-old boy Joshua comes of age in a blistering conflict between the love of power and the power of love... and must confront his own dark side as human evolution explodes around him (Book II).

In *Splintered Light*, the fifteen-year-old biracial girl Eva evolves into the first of the new human species and the reluctant Second Coming of Christ... in a world imploding around her (Book III).

The entire trilogy is strongly mythological, and draws on a variety of spiritual and religious traditions, turning some of them upside down or inside out. *[Insight 13]* By design, the books become progressively more character-driven as the trilogy progresses. *[Insight 14]*

Creativity is a wonderful thing to find inside yourself, but it's especially fun to watch it bubbling up in your own child. I'd had some inkling of it watching Lee grow up, of course, but I don't remember it being such a wellspring. Sharing a creative process with her as an adult, I just love it. Here's a bit of anecdotal history... and yes, it does have a point for you, my friends...

The four of us are sitting around the dinner table on Lee's 15th birthday. This was well before we started writing together. She announces "When I'm 18, Dad, I wanna jump out of an airplane."

Her older sister Meg starts giggling. "Skydiving? Leanne!"

I savor a spoonful of Carvel ice cream cake, studying Lee. *Oh, oh. The kid is serious.*

Her mother looks at me. Gives me the eyebrow, the one that says *do not encourage her, dummy.*

I mentally calibrate the mother eyebrow elevation. *Way up. That's a bad sign.*

I mentally calibrate the daughter hopeful half-smile. *She's always been a determined kid. And this one is clear in her eyes.*

I swallow the ice cream.

"Lee, honeybunch," I speak as my mind balances the calibrations off against each other, "you're never going to jump out of an airplane..."

The smile runs away from my daughter's face.

Her mother's eyebrow drops down to its equilibrium position.

"...without me," I add.

The eyebrow shoots up, at Warp 8.

Both daughters burst into laughter. They had the eyebrow calibrated, too.

Three years pass, without another word on the subject. Then it's the morning of Lee's 18th birthday...

"C'mon, kiddo, we gotta go get your birthday present."

She's a little sleepy, not enough coffee yet. "Go? Present? Where, Dad?"

"Northampton."

"Massachusetts?"

"Yup."

"What's there?"

"Airport."

"Airport?" She's still a little sleepy.

"Yeah. With airplanes... and, you know... parachutes..."

She comes fully awake.

"Dad! You remembered!" That hopeful half-smile of three years past blossoms into a huge grin.

"Dads don't forget," I chide her.

We laugh all the way to the airport.

I tell this story to you, my friends, because jumping out of an airplane is -- like writing a novel -- an act of faith. [*Insight 15*] The jump is on the website, along with other stuff about the book and the trilogy, www.monkeytrap.us.

I hope this is helpful. Best of luck with your writing, my friends...

Denning Powell
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Insight #1: Ecclesiastes got it right. "... a time to every purpose under heaven". You'll know when that is.

Insight #2: Figure out what you really want. Of course you want your debut Great American Novel to get rave reviews in the New York Times and sell a bazillion copies in its first week out. That's fun to dream about. But you'll probably be happier and healthier if you focus on the creative journey and enjoy it, rather than focus on the outcome. Either Yoda or some other Zen master pointed that out. So... think about why you're really writing, and let that guide you, and be patient with the process. And with yourself.

Insight #3: Write the kind of stuff that really turns you on. What you enjoy reading is what you'll enjoy writing. And it will show. Do what you love. Even small niches have faithful readerships.

Insight #4: Originality goes a long way. Yeah, I know, all the plots have been done, etc, etc, all stories today are derivative, etc, etc. But that's the tune a lot of physicists sang at the end of the nineteenth century -- 'everything has already been invented' -- but of course it hadn't. I like what Niels Bohr said: "Your theory is crazy, but not crazy enough to be true." And of course there always are interesting variations on any theme. So give it your best shot.

Insight #5: Persistence. I like what Woodrow Wilson said: "Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan 'press on' has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race." Writing is tough. Getting published is tougher. The traditional market is terrible for new writers, partly because there's so much good stuff out there, and partly because the bigger publishing houses only want to bet on sure things (i.e., established names). But that's the reality, and you have to live with it, so persistence is essential; you just keep trying. And these days the industry is being turned on its ear, so you can persist along alternative pathways simultaneously.

Insight #6: Dismiss all nattering nabobs of negativity. The digital world is opening up non-traditional, imaginative paths to publication that weren't even envisioned ten years ago. Artists of all sorts now have the ability to sidestep traditional routes and go directly to the consumer. Novels, paintings, music, videos, animations... they're all finding more direct expression on the internet. Sometimes there's even serious money involved. Don't let the odds stop you. Also see Insight #5.

Insight #7: Feel the premise and promise, deep inside. All good stories are about conflict. And archetypes exist for a reason: they strike a deep emotional chord. (I'm speaking about fiction here, not non-fiction.)

Insight #8: Houston, we have lift-off. The hardest thing is beginning. The natural thing -- at least for me -- is to dither around... I look out the window, clean under my fingernails, scratch my butt, meow at the cat. You wait for something to happen, the light to dawn, the muse to strike. Some of that may actually be okay, because your brain may be working on things at a lower

level. But at some point, you gotta get disgusted with nothing happening and boot the muse. After all, a kick in the ass is a step forward.

Insight #9: It always takes more time than you think it will. My years of experience say the factor is 2.6. Possibly the factor is some natural function or resonant frequency of the universe that's close to that -- such as e , the base of natural logarithms -- but 2.6 plus or minus a few tenths has generally worked well for me.

Insight #10: Your best style is the one that works for you. I freely admit all writers are different. Some can keep a story in their head -- not outline at all, just start writing and work straight through to the end and have it all come out perfectly. Wish I were that fortunate. But I'm not. And I'm an engineer, I like to figure things out on paper before turning them into physical reality... erasers are cheap, especially the computer kind.

Insight #11: Total immersion is good, as long as you don't drown. It's good to be really absorbed in a story, but there are the occasional roses to be smelled, backs to be stretched, bodies to be stroked, perspectives to be retained. You know what I mean.

Insight #12: Think big. What the hell, it doesn't cost any more.

Insight #13: Have fun with traditions. Sex, politics, religion -- all sure subjects that can get people edgy. So stir the pot. When the Pope got mad at Dan Brown's version of biblical history, sales of *The Da Vinci Code* spiked up. (And, by the way, the use of a noetic science backdrop such as what's in *The Lost Symbol*? I beat Dan Brown to it by a good five years. It's really fascinating stuff, and real science too.) Never let facts or traditions or other opinions get in the way of a good story. As a fiction writer, you're entitled.

Insight #14: Have fun with your characters. I relate to the character I'm writing about at the time -- I do tend to get immersed. But I especially relate to certain qualities of some of the characters in the trilogy: Joshua for his moral dilemma; Eva for her innocence; Hessa for her mystery; Elia for her complexity; Zurvan for his unbridled evil. Qualities are really fun for a writer to play with. Most characters have good points (rooting interests) and bad points (flaws or emotional wounds or scars or other defects). Slam those bad points until they bleed.

Insight #15: Faith. When you're sitting in an airplane hatch with ten thousand feet of emptiness below your dangling feet, you're hoping that the expert you're strapped onto doesn't have a death wish, that he's packed his chute carefully, that he doesn't have a brain aneurism that's going to rupture with sudden elevation change or that if he does that the backup chute popout is set for a high enough altitude above ground. All sorts of reasons not to launch, but... Faith, baby, faith.