

us—or even ourselves—it's not because people and characters are irreconcilably different in kind. Rather, we simply devote more time and energy trying to understand our characters than we do our friends, relatives, neighbors, and enemies. Perhaps that's unfortunate. Then again, maybe our characters are just more interesting.

Regardless, don't confuse a wealth of information with complete knowledge. If you know a character completely, you've trapped her like a fly in amber—which is one more lesson to take away from the people we know. No matter how much we may try to confine them in our understanding, they invariably escape, and surprise us. So should our characters.

Review the following list. Reflect upon the person in your life who fits each description given—jot down her name, fix her in your mind, remember a few details about her life: her physical appearance, the effect she had on you, and anything else you think would be important if you were to describe her to someone who didn't already know her.

Pay particular attention first to those traits you consider fundamental, then second to those traits that surprise or intrigue you.

If possible, try to recall a memorable or pivotal event involving you and the person in question:

- (a) A family member to whom you feel particularly close
- (b) A family member from whom you're estranged or whom you particularly dislike

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- (c) A stranger whose path crossed yours this past week
- (d) A person you know personally and admire
- (e) A person you know personally and fear
- (f) The love who got away
- (g) The love you wish had gotten away
- (h) First love
- (i) Greatest love
- (j) Greatest childhood nemesis
- (k) Greatest adulthood nemesis
- (l) Person from childhood who annoyed you the most
- (m) Person in your present-day life who annoys you the most
- (n) Favorite neighbor
- (o) Least favorite neighbor
- (p) Favorite coworker
- (q) Least favorite coworker
- (r) Your mail carrier or someone else you deal with on a "business" level daily
- (s) An older person who has inspired you
- (t) A child who fascinates you

- (u) Someone on whom you have a secret crush
- (v) Someone you believe has a crush on you
- (w) A person who believed in you
- (x) A person who thought you'd never amount to anything
- (y) A person you envy
- (z) A person whose life you would *never* trade for your own

The first and most important thing this work should inspire is a deeper and more precise emotional connection to the people inhabiting your memory. Take a moment to register that emotional impact fully and meaningfully. We forget so much in the confusing and relentless demands of everyday life. This exercise is an attempt to dredge up from that oblivion what we have forgotten—but not lost.

It can also be useful to take distinct eras of your life and ask these questions for each time period. A person who believed in you when you were in elementary school is an excellent character; but so is the one who believed in you when you hit your twenties, or middle age.

Once you've done this, try to find some connection between the paired individuals: For example, I realized that my childhood nemesis was an older brother who was a perfectionist, constantly badgering me for being thoughtless and sloppy. My adult nemesis is a neighbor who is—well, guess what—thoughtless and sloppy.

It's important to know these things about oneself, be-

cause they inform us about our own emotional inclinations and limitations—and contradictions. They provide a framework for our own choices about our characters, and expose where we might be able to expand our emotional horizons.

Writing out such a list also provides us with a larger cast of characters than we originally might have realized we possessed. We can sometimes unwittingly get into ruts, writing variations on the same characters over and over—the overbearing parent, the needy lover, the insufferable phony. Near the end of his life, John Updike wrote a poem titled “Peggy Lutz, Fred Muth,” in which he thanked his childhood friends and classmates—the beauty and bully, the fatso and others—“for providing a sufficiency of human types . . . all a writer needs.”

Although the foregoing list tends to emphasize people who have a particularly memorable impact, don't disregard those who may have slipped into the psychological background—childhood neighbors and classmates especially. We spent much of our early life around such people, they had a key emotional and psychological impact on us even when we weren't paying close attention, and thus we remember them more vividly than we might at first believe: the older girl we admired but were too scared to talk to, the elderly neighbor who kept to himself, the wild girl at school, the wild girl's best friend, “the quiet one,” the class clown, and so forth. Quickly, one realizes that we carry an entire world inside us, ready to be explored.

Also, though the foregoing emphasizes people with whom you have some genuine familiarity, don't neglect the inspiration that can come from strangers. The actress Sarah Jones patrols the streets of New York looking for