

This email might be cut short by your email account. [Click here](#) to view in full.

Wisdom From The (Not So Secret) Order of The Titanides: Vol. 9

Practicing Care of the Container

How do we build the best environment for writers to succeed?



I fell in love with writing in the eighth grade. It was in Mr. Hoss's English class. He made us write an essay a week, every week for eight weeks straight. To listen to my classmates talk, you would have thought he was waterboarding us. But I was in heaven. I couldn't wait for Monday to find out our next assignment.

I remember one week we had to write a descriptive essay. I wrote about pheasant hunting with my dad and his buddy, Ed Fink. I talked about the sound of the tall dry grass as we walked the field, the pink of the sky at dawn, and the smell of Ed's pipe. My dad was so proud he photocopied the essay and mailed it to all his hunting buddies.

But then I hit high school. And suddenly I became all gangly legged and self-conscious. I developed a harsh inner critic. She was a nasty bitch, and she was convinced I couldn't write.

By the time I left for college, I'd stopped writing. Instead of studying creative writing, I decided to do the next best thing... I became an English major.

The problem was, the more I studied great writers like Toni Morrison, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Pat Conroy, the more convinced I became that I couldn't write. I mean, if I couldn't write like Toni Morrison, what was the point of wasting pen and paper?

It wasn't until I graduated from the University of Chicago and moved to Cincinnati that I found writing again. In 1989, I met a woman named Mary Pierce Brosmer. She is the founder of a unique women-only writing school called, Women Writing for (a) Change.

After years spent inside academic institutions designed and built by and for men, Mary was fed up. She was fed up with creative writing programs based on competition, posturing, and one-upmanship. She had come to believe that women needed a new model of creative collaboration.

Mary set out to deliberately create a different type of "creative container." One where women's voices were valued and heard. One that inspired creativity and generosity instead of fear and combat.

The result was that I felt safe enough for the first time to put my words out there again... to take a risk... to create... to call myself a "writer." It's because of Mary and the unique "container" she created that I became a full-time copywriter.

I've been thinking about that container she created a lot lately. I've been thinking about how I deliver feedback and criticism to copywriters. And I've found myself wondering if I can do better...

Braced for a Beating...

Recently, an aspiring financial copywriter asked me to give him feedback on his copy. He said to me, "Don't be gentle, I can take it." As if he was braced for a physical beating, not creative feedback. He believed that if I wasn't harsh enough, then it wasn't good feedback.



This is the culture we've created. One where the best copywriters are tough-as-nails. Where it's a point of pride if you know how to take a beating. And where too often we behave as if kindness and courtesy are unnecessary or superfluous.

As a copy chief, I'm guilty of barking out orders instead of listening. I've used the "because I said so..." defense. And I've committed the "just do it like I told you..." crime as well. My excuse is that I'm too busy to slow down and explain things, but it's a lame excuse.

Now look, I'm not suggesting we all hold hands and sing love songs. Or that everyone should get a participation trophy just for trying. Or that we should only say neutered nice things about the copy.

As a writer, I want valuable feedback and criticism. I need to know where my work is weak, where it falls short, and what I need to do to improve it. Because it's the

only way that I can learn and grow.

But I believe that together we can build a better "container." One that is more supportive of the creative process. One where both copywriters and copy chiefs work together to find the best solutions. One that demands the best of our copywriters while keeping them engaged and encouraging them to take risks. One that helps me get out of my ego and become a better chief.

What Exactly is a "Container?"

When I talk about the "container" I'm not talking about storage solutions or Tupperware. I'm talking about the "container" in which the work takes place. This can include everything from the physical space, to the organizational culture, to the rules of engagement for meetings and copy review sessions.

The *copy* is the work. But the *context* in which the work is reviewed and critiqued is what I call the "container."

In the Titanides, when I talk about creating a safe space for women, I'm talking about the container. Now I realize that "safe space" sounds like some kind of new age, woo woo, female empowerment bullshit...

But I couldn't figure out how else to describe the container we've created here. And I couldn't find the words to explain why this safety is so critical to success. I knew it intuitively because I experienced it all those years ago in Women Writing for (a) Change, but I didn't have any data to back it up.

Why Feeling Safe is Critical to Success

Then I discovered another honorary Titanide, Amy C. Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School. She's been studying organizations for over two decades. She calls this "psychological safety." And her research shows that it's critical for learning, innovation, and growth in today's knowledge-based economy.

Psychological safety is basically a fancy way of saying that we feel safe enough to take risks. We are willing to be vulnerable. And we are not afraid of being punished when we make a mistake.

When we say that the Titanides is a "safe space," this is what we mean. It's a place where women feel safe enough to take risks, to speak their mind, and to be creative... all without getting attacked. And it's one of the most important factors for success in any group.

The folks at Google recently reviewed their top-performing teams. They wanted to know what made these superstar geeks different. It wasn't their technical skills or their I.Q. Instead, researchers discovered that all these super successful teams had ONE thing in common. They all had a high level of psychological safety.

The bottom line is that for technology geeks, or writers, or marketers, or entrepreneurs to succeed, we all need to feel safe. Our ability to create, to innovate, to solve problems, is all deeply connected to how safe we feel.

Why You Should Never Think Like a Lizard

As Laura Delizonna explains in her Harvard Business Review article, *High-Performing Teams Need Psychological Safety*, it all goes back to our caveman days.

When we feel threatened, our lizard brain kicks in. That's because our brains can't tell the difference between a harsh critic and a saber-toothed tiger. In both cases, our fight-or-flight mechanism kicks in and our perspective and ability to reason goes out the window.

When we feel blamed or criticized, our lizard brain response is to come out swinging. We become defensive, we push back, or worse, we disengage altogether.

Contrary to popular belief, it's not fear of the stick that motivates people to succeed. A new study from the University of North Carolina found that it's positive emotions that increase our ability to solve complex problems. Emotions like trust, curiosity, confidence and inspiration broaden our minds and open us to new possibilities.

When we feel "psychologically safe," we are more open-minded, more resilient, more motivated and more persistent.

So how do we create psychological safety with copy teams? Or any creative team?

In her book, *The Fearless Organization*, Amy Edmondson describes the unique container that Pixar uses to critique movie scripts.

They call it the Braintrust, and there are three rules.

Rule #1: The feedback must be constructive. It must be about the project, not the person. And the filmmaker cannot be defensive or take criticism personally. They must be willing to hear the truth.

Rule #2: The comments are suggestions, not mandates. The director is ultimately the one responsible for the movie and can take or leave the solutions offered.

Rule #3: Critique sessions are not "gotcha" exercises but must come from a place of empathy. Those who are giving feedback have already gone through the same process themselves. They empathize with the director and praise and appreciate vision and ambition.

Diana Pavlac Glyer is a science fiction-loving honorary Titanide. Her book, *Bandersnatch*, is about the famous creative writing group, The Inklings. It included C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien.

The Inklings had similar rules for creating a "safe space" for writers.

Rule #1: Do not offer diagnosis, offer specific suggestions

Rule #2: Invite feedback early, when the paint is still wet, and the ink hasn't dried.

Rule #3: The choice to accept or reject the advice is always the author's.

These are all great rules to follow if you're setting up your own copy critique group.

But I have a few caveats....

First, it's damned hard not to get defensive and take criticism personally. You have to work at this. I've been writing for over 15 years at this point, and I recently had a complete defensive meltdown while working on a project. I wasn't taking care of myself and I fell into victimhood. It happens to the best of us. Notice when you're falling apart and get help!

Second, the best way to avoid getting defensive and having a meltdown is to practice something called "textual indeterminacy." Anne Gere, another honorary Titanide, studied creative writing groups. She found that the most successful writers were always open to the possibility of major change. In other words, they considered their copy fluid, not fixed. Don't get attached to anything! (Note: I'll be talking more about how to train yourself to remain open to criticism and copy suggestions in the next Titanides newsletter.)

Finally, if you're working at a top-level direct response company and your copy chief has decades of experience writing multimillion-dollar promos... take the suggestions as fact. Don't argue. Don't ignore it. Don't think you know better. Just do it.

Before you engage in a copy critique, it might be helpful to review the ground rules. To make sure everyone is on the same page. To slow down and take the time to discuss the "container" before doing the work. This is something we try hard to practice in the Titanides before every Fast Write, or Salon, or Retreat.



Why Safety Comes Before Creativity

Because, when the container isn't safe, the community falls apart.

The Inklings were very successful until a new member joined...

His name was Hugo Dyson, and he absolutely hated hobbits. Instead of providing valuable feedback and criticism, he completely dismissed Tolkien's work.

He would drink too much, throw himself on the couch and moan, "Oh, God, not with the hobbits again..." whenever Tolkien would read.

Psychological safety went out the window. No one felt safe anymore to share rough drafts or far-fetched ideas. The writers shut down. They stopped taking risks, and the group slowly fell apart.

I see this happen to promising copywriters all the time. Because so few people really understand what it takes to create and maintain psychological safety.

It isn't easy. It takes a lot of time and attention. And it requires everyone in the community to participate.

I call this "care of the container" and I consider it one of my most important jobs as the fearless leader of the Titanides.

How We're Striving to Create a Safe Container for the Titanides

I have a confession to make...

For years, I was terrified to teach. I was confident that I knew the content. But I

was terrified of holding the "container." I didn't believe that I could do it without being overwhelmed.

Ironically, it took my son's mental illness and addiction to teach me how to set clear boundaries and create a safe container. It taught me that I do not have to take care of everyone or rescue everyone. It also taught me to be vigilant about protecting the space.

In the Titanides, I use the rules and guidelines I learned from my mentor Mary Pierce Brosmer in *Women Writing for (a) Change*, from my Al-Anon group, and from groups like Pixar and the Inklings.

If you've ever participated in one of our Fearless Fast Writes, or The Summer Salon, or the Titanides Retreat or attended our Titanides Conference, then you've heard me talk about these rules.

We practice confidentiality...

We speak from our own experience...

We do not tear another woman down...

We don't gossip or criticize...

We're not perfect, and we all slip up – especially me!

The important thing is that we are aware of the importance of the container. Most teachers have no idea what the "container" is, let alone how to care for it. And that can cause a lot of harm.

In the Titanides, we all co-create this container together. We are all responsible for making sure it is psychologically safe for every woman to participate. And we all have an obligation to share what works and doesn't work.

This is why after every event, salon, retreat, etc. I ask you to share your "gifts and challenges" with me. This isn't just a navel-gazing exercise in asking for testimonials. I need your feedback to constantly care for and evaluate the container...

In the Titanides, we are building a new arena, where dynamic, creative women co-mentor, elevate, and support each other on the journey to success.

We do that by following the rules we've established. And by being vigilant about creating a "psychologically safe" place for women to succeed.

If you can agree to our rules, if you want to be a part of this new arena we are building, then I hope you'll [join us](#).

And if you're [already a member](#), then thank you, from my heart, for engaging in this creative work with me.

I believe that together we can build a better container for all of us. One that empowers, inspires and encourages risk-taking and creativity. One where we all feel safe enough to become our biggest version of ourselves.

Love,

Marcella

If you'd like to become a member, click the button below!

[Join Today](#)

If you're already a member, click the button below to...

[Check Out What's New](#)