

NEGOTIATING GUN VIOLENCE IN STUDENT SCREENPLAYS

HOW TO FIGHT 'COOL CHARACTERS WIELDING WEAPONS' WITH EMPATHY AND UNDERSTANDING



MARYLAND, 1998.

VIDEO AMERICAN.



VIDEO
Americain
- the world's best movies™



4 300271





APR 13

**HELP US SAVE
THE VIDEO
AMERICAN
ARCHIVE!**
25 YEARS & 30,000+
Titles in the making
SIGN UP BELOW!

**MOVIES WITH
STARS**
ON THE SPINE, ARE OUR
HOUSE RECOMMENDATIONS!

GIFT CERTIFICATES
SUN-FRI
RENT **2** GET A **3RD**
FREE!

SATURDAY
RENT **3** GET A **4TH**
FREE!

**Stanley
Kauffmann**
A World
on Film

**VideoHound's
VIDEO
PRELUDE**

**PRODUCED
BY
BRANDON**



KATHLEEN

TURNER



A loving mother.
A caring wife.
A model citizen.

So what's
the problem?

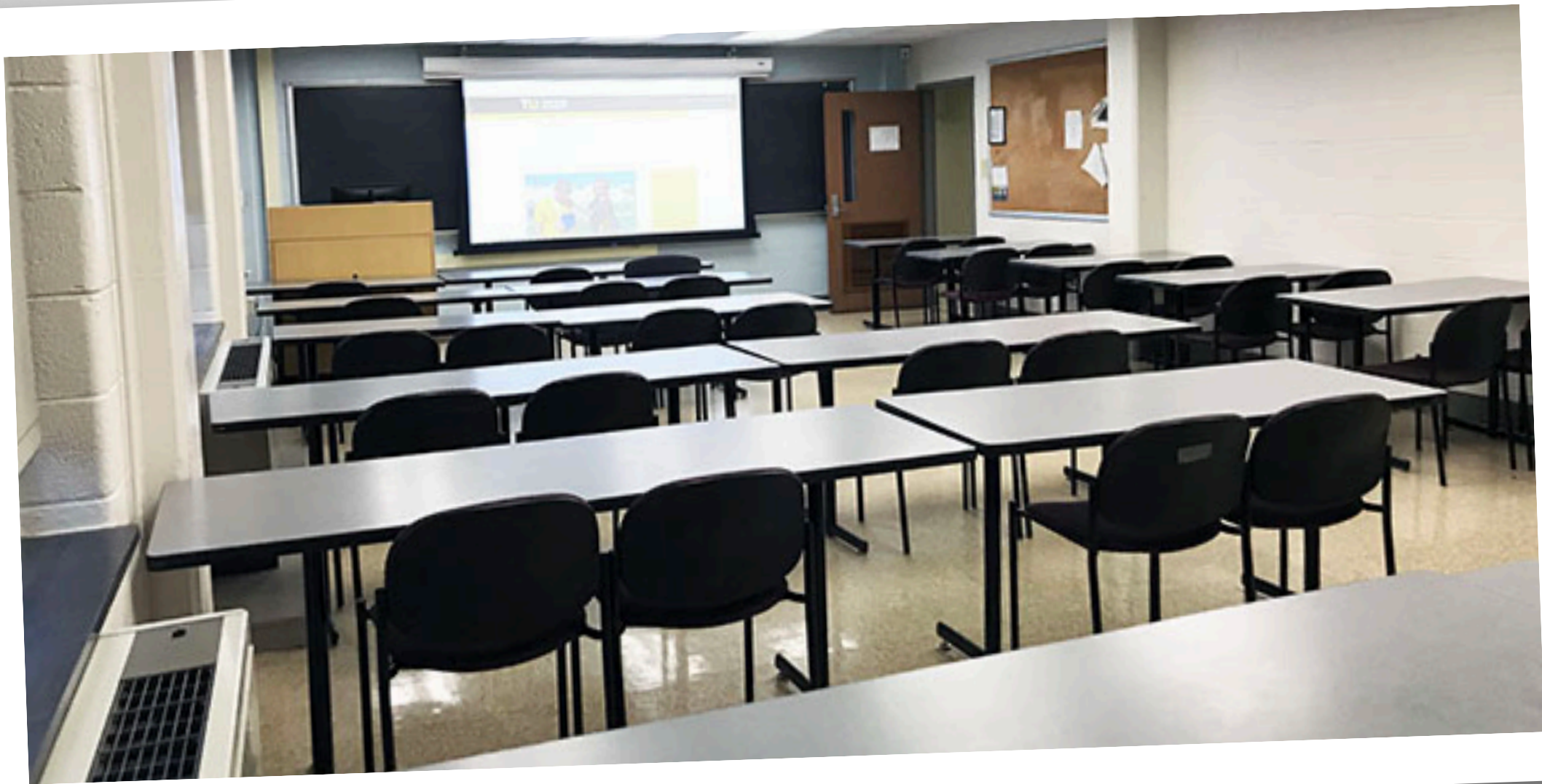
A JOHN WATERS FILM

SERIAL
mom

18

MARYLAND, 2022

TOWSON UNIVERSITY.



THE ROBBERY.

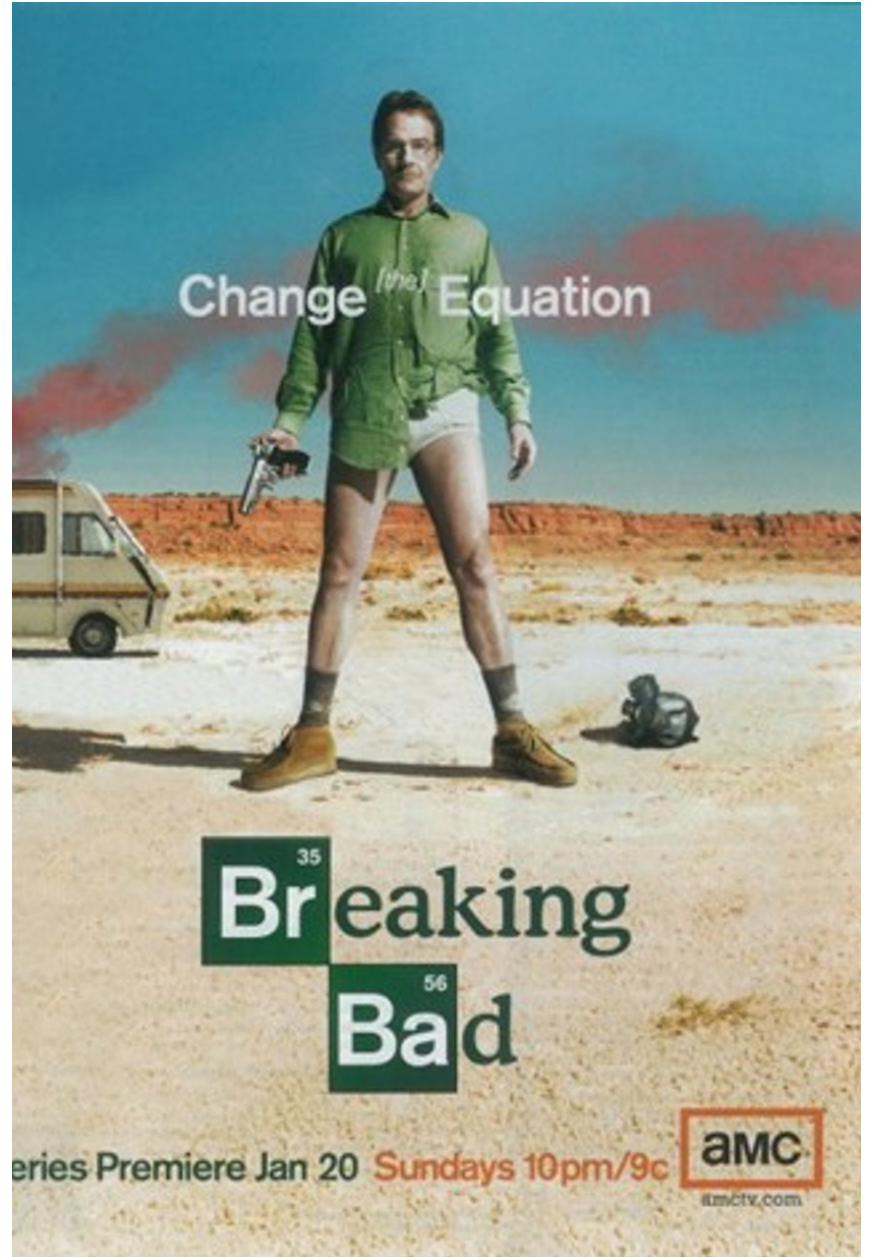
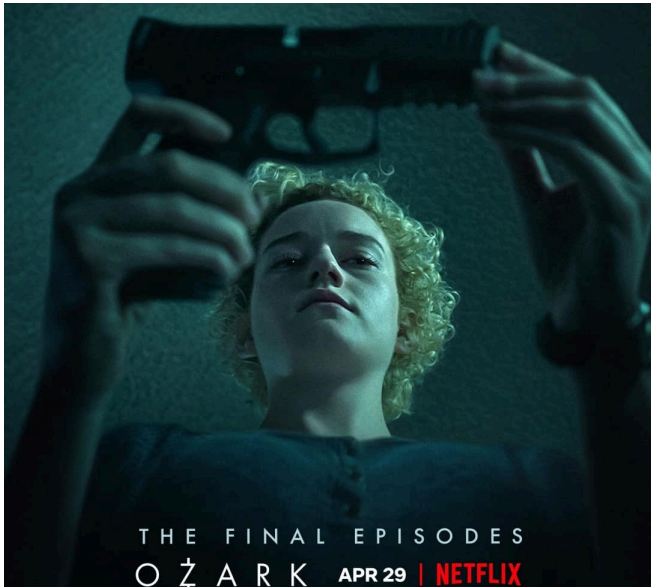
VIDEO AMERICAN.





THE DIRTY COP.

TOWSON UNIVERSITY.

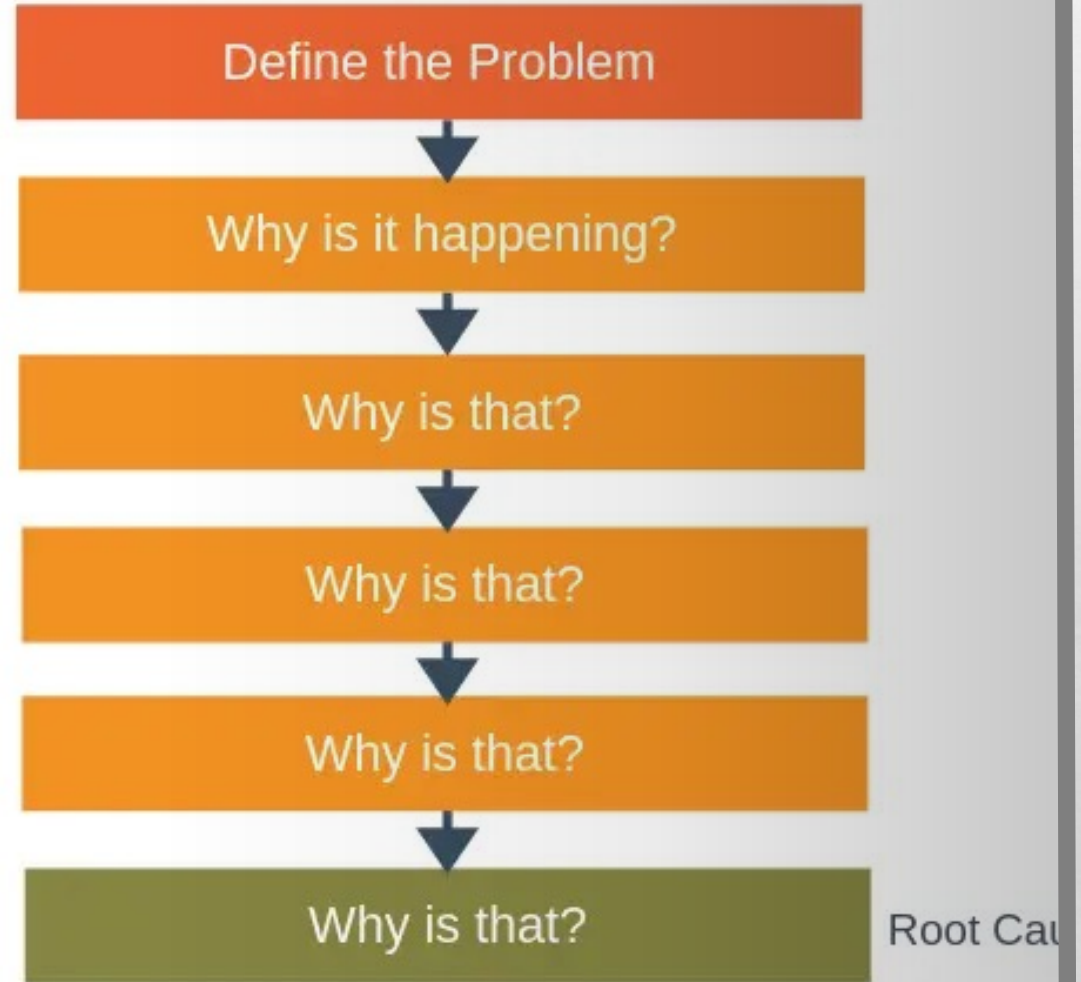


THE FIVE WHYS.

SAKICHI TOYODA.



The 5 Whys



THE ROBBER.

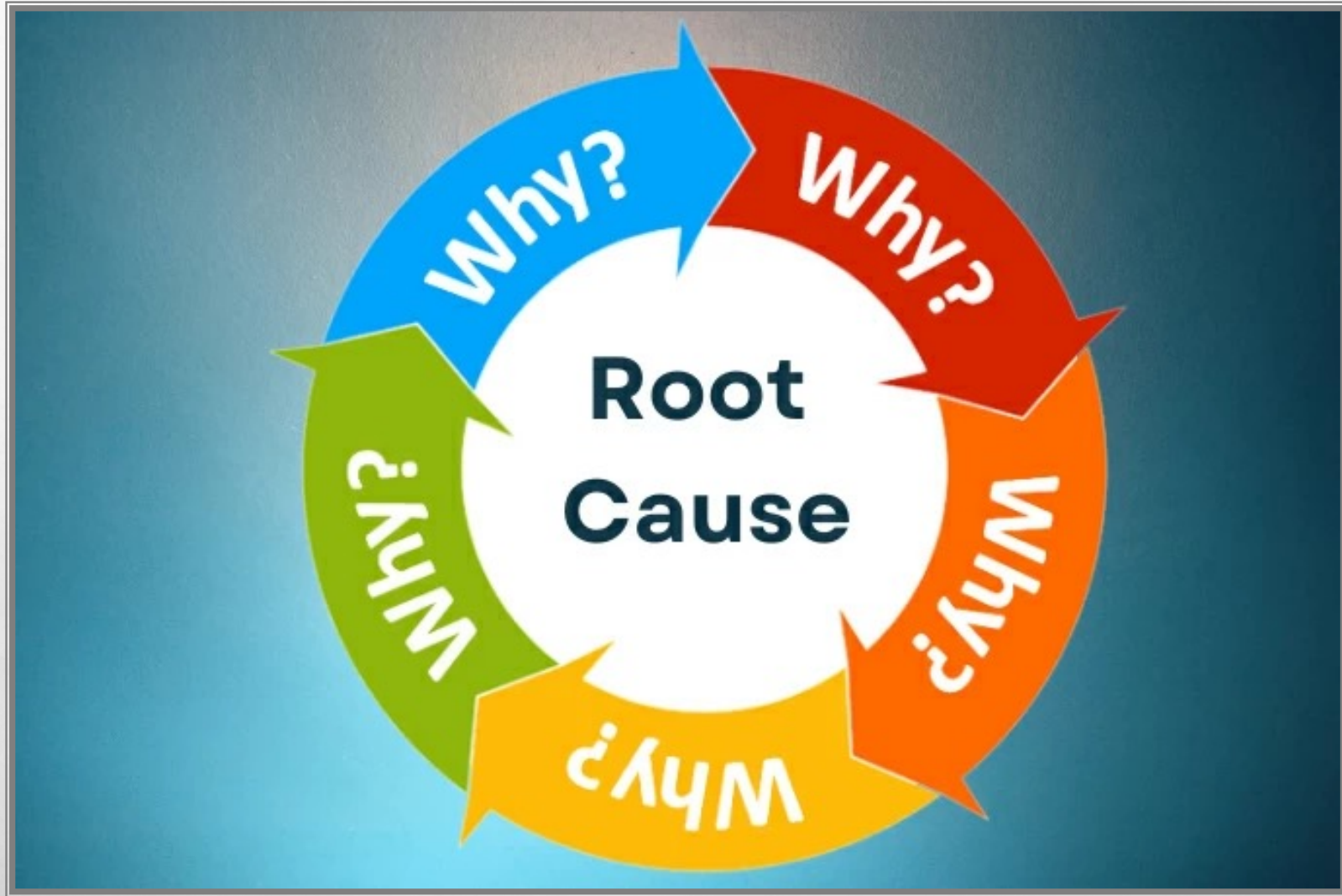
VIDEO AMERICAN.





THE ACTIVE SHOOTER.

TOWSON UNIVERSITY.



THE POLICE.

VIDEO AMERICAN.



EMPATHY.



IN STORY.

LESLIE JAMISON

“EMPATHY COMES FROM THE GREEK EMPATHEIA – EM (INTO) AND PATHOS (FEELING) – A PENETRATION, A KIND OF TRAVEL. IT SUGGESTS YOU ENTER ANOTHER PERSON’S PAIN AS YOU’D ENTER ANOTHER COUNTRY, THROUGH IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS, BORDER CROSSING BY WAY OF QUERY: WHAT GROWS WHERE YOU ARE? WHAT ARE THE LAWS? WHAT ANIMALS GRAZE THERE?”



MICHAEL K. WILLIAMS

“I USE MY JOB TO ENGAGE EMPATHY
AND COMPASSION FOR PEOPLE SOCIETY
MIGHT STEREOTYPE OR OSTRACIZE.”



ROGER EBERT

"WE ALL ARE BORN WITH A CERTAIN PACKAGE. WE ARE WHO WE ARE: WHERE WE WERE BORN, WHO WE WERE BORN AS, HOW WE WERE RAISED. WE'RE KIND OF STUCK INSIDE THAT PERSON, AND THE PURPOSE OF CIVILIZATION AND GROWTH IS TO BE ABLE TO REACH OUT AND EMPATHIZE A LITTLE BIT WITH OTHER PEOPLE. AND FOR ME, THE MOVIES ARE LIKE A MACHINE THAT GENERATES EMPATHY. IT LETS YOU UNDERSTAND A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT DIFFERENT HOPES, ASPIRATIONS, DREAMS AND FEARS. IT HELPS US TO IDENTIFY WITH THE PEOPLE WHO ARE SHARING THIS JOURNEY WITH US."



THE END



*Negotiating Gun Violence in Student Screenplays:
Teaching Young Writers to Examine and Develop Characters' Unknown Needs in Zero Drafts; or
How to Fight 'Cool Characters Wielding Weapons' with Empathy and Understanding*

Joseph Ross Angelella, UFVA 2023

ONE.

SLIDE. It was January of 1998. I was 17 and working illegally at an independent video rental store called **SLIDE** Video American in Baltimore, Maryland. I was paid in cash, “under the table,” as the owners liked to say, and was the youngest member on staff. **SLIDE** All of us were some variant of misfit—aspiring screenwriters, filmmakers, novelists, jazz musicians, painters, and poets. **SLIDE** We loved movies. We had opinions. We weren’t great at our jobs. We were a cliched bunch. Like a bad movie.

SLIDE The owners had hired me because they owed my father a favor. He was head of the sound department for many of John Waters’ movies. **SLIDE** When it came to *Serial Mom*, a film about a seemingly perfect Baltimore housewife and mother (played by Kathleen Turner) who gains celebrity status as a serial killer, they shot a scene outside of Video American. My father was able to position the owners as extras in the scene, so they would make it on camera. And they did. And so, when he went to them and asked them to give me a job, they obliged.

It was January and it was cold. A Sunday in my senior year of high school. I had been scheduled to work the closing shift from 5 to 9pm. It was a slow and boring night. We played Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin movies on the TV with our own soundtracks of Brian Eno and Velvet Underground and Johnny Cash pumped through the speakers. Then, ten minutes to close, a man entered our store and put a gun to my head.

TWO.

SLIDE In the winter of last year, I was teaching an upper-level screenwriting workshop at a university when a text message went out to everyone that there was an active shooter on campus, ordering us to “shelter in place,” a phrase that meant something totally different only two years prior. Students laughed at the alert.

Who would do that here, they said.

But why, they said.

Are they cancelling class, they asked.

A group of students gathered outside of my room. I told them I was closing the door. I asked that they come in and wait with my class. They laughed and declined.

SLIDE

A week before every school year, I go to campus and walkthrough my schedule, visiting every room that’s been assigned to me. I call it my *safety check*. I look for things. Does the door lock? Does it open in or out? Is there a window? Are the walls made of plaster or cinderblock? Or both? Are there windows? Do they open? Is there a podium? Does it move? Where are the light switches? Do I get cell service? I usually call my wife and see if she can hear me. (As you can imagine, she hates these safety checks.) Where is the nearest exit in the building? What are safe locations nearby to run to, if needed?

After I saw the footage of the Robb Elementary School shooting where parents begged the police to go into the building to save their kids and they refused, I spoke to my son’s preschool teacher and asked what their safety protocol was for something like what had happened in Uvalde, Texas. Their measures sounded a lot like mine, and then she told me that

they recently installed bulletproof glass in all of the preschool classrooms. I remember thinking, I wonder if there is a way to check on the grade of glass in my classrooms.

This is the world we live in now.

The students in the hallway laughed and declined my offer to shelter in place, so I closed the door and ran through my protocol. The door opened into the room and locked from the inside, so I dragged the desk to the door to barricade it. There were no windows. We were on the basement-level. We had bad cell service, so I texted my wife what was happening and reassured her we were safe. (As you can imagine, she was worried.) We were right next to a fire exit. There was a patch of woods not far from our building—a great place to flee, if needed.

After thirty minutes, the order was lifted. The threat had left the area. And we were no longer in danger. Later one of my students would find a video on Twitter of the suspect running from a police officer through campus with a cell phone in his hand, not a gun. He had gotten in a car accident and was fleeing the scene on foot, cutting through campus, and police were giving chase. They were afraid he had a gun, and they sent out the shelter in place as a precaution.

Now that the excitement of the shelter in place order had ended, we began table reads of their short scripts. First up was a script about a Scarface-type drug dealer torturing a dirty cop.

THREE.

SLIDE When he first pulled the gun, the nose of the weapon got caught on his waistband. **SLIDE** It snagged. And as tends to happen with me, I laughed. I laugh at inappropriate times. An involuntary reaction. A defense mechanism, allowing me time to process whatever weighty thing is happening. He didn't appreciate this and slapped the nose of the gun to my forehead hard and told me if I didn't give him all the money, he would blow my brains out.

Honestly, he sounded like a bad movie. He didn't look like a villain. He looked stressed out. Not a junky. Not hopped up on narcotics. He was desperate. Granted his adrenaline was pumping, but more than anything he looked determined.

I gave him what was in the drawer. It wasn't much. Slow night in January. Which made him angry. **SLIDE** He barked for me to come out from behind the cramped counter to the front of the store, where he pushed me to the ground, smashed my head into the carpet and push the gun to the back of my head and once again told me he was going to blow my brains out.

The first time he said it, I'm not sure I processed anything but the gun in my face . But this time when he said it, I disassociated from my body, hovered over us in the store, and watched as my entire life flashed before my eyes, in the most cliched of ways, just like a bad movie.

FOUR.

SLIDE As with all new writers, my screenwriting students write what they're watching. **SLIDE** Collectively, they had been on a deep binge of *Breaking Bad* and *Ozark* and *Barry* and all the *John Wicks*. A new or young writer's perception of crime narratives is always focused on cool characters wielding weapons. Their stories often lack depth, lack truth, lack accessibility and most of all consequence. These crime shows and films give them license to simply throw a gun in a scene and describe some kind of cool shot or cool line of dialogue and believe that they've done their work as artists. And maybe in certain contexts, they have done their job. But not in my class. And to be clear, I love that first John Wick movie. They killed his dog and stole his car, and he missed his dead wife, and he was sad, and pissed off, and therefore he killed

everybody. I SO get that. But getting students to dig deeper into character is often a Herculean task.

So, it was no surprise that the first script we read was a Scarface-type drug dealer torturing a dirty cop who was tied to a chair with an extension cord as the drug dealer tortured him with all sorts of weapons. Too many cool lines to count, and I will give it to him—a few of them were pretty good too. So much backstory in the dialogue. In the end, the drug dealer let the cop go. And ultimately nothing happened in the story, other than the torture.

So, I began my workshop with the same questions I always ask.

“What is working here? What do we like? What is the writer doing well?” I asked the class.

The class loved it. They reveled in the hyper-stylized violence of it all.

I did not. And turned to the writer.

“What does the drug dealer want?” I asked.

The student thought for a second. “He wants the truth. He wants to know if the cop is wearing a wire.”

Pushing past the logic problem of simply having the drug dealer check the dirty cop to see if he was wearing a wire, I kept the pressure on. I wasn’t convinced our main character was the Scarface-type drug dealer. I felt like it should be the dirty cop.

“But why does he want the truth?” I asked. This was my first why.

“Because the cop is lying to him,” the student said.

“Why?” I asked, a second time.

“Because the cop doesn’t want to die,” the student said, very annoyed now.

“Why?” I asked a third time.

The class started laughing now, thinking I was picking on the student. I shut it down and told them to pay attention. That I was going somewhere. That all of their work suffered this same problem.

I continued. “Why doesn’t the cop want to die?”

The student thought for a moment, then said, “Because he has a new baby at home, and he doesn’t want her to grow up without a dad.”

The student was being coy. He knew I had a new baby girl at home, and he was using me and my life to fill in his backstory as a means to survive this interrogation, just as the cop did his.

“Why doesn’t he want his baby girl to grow up without a dad?” I asked a fourth time.

“Because he grew up without a dad?” the student said.

“Why?” I asked a fifth and final time.

“Because his dad was a piece of shit.”

I turned to the class and asked a different question, “which is more compelling to you—the torture or the childhood trauma?”

Their answers changed. They loved the whole backstory of the dirty cop with a new baby girl at home. That he didn’t want to turn out just like his dad. And yet here he was still making bad decisions and getting himself mixed up with bad people and bad things that could cause his very downfall and make his greatest fear come true—becoming just like his own piece of shit father. The story suddenly had stakes and emotional depth. There was empathy for days.

Needless to say, the student didn’t take any of my advice on his rewrite.

FIVE.

SLIDE When I first started in academia, I taught professional writing classes at the University of Maryland for five years where we always discussed ways to analyze the central problem of a business proposals or recommendation report. I taught SWOT Analysis, Six Thinking Hats, CATWOE, MOST Analysis, Rogerian Argument, but the one that always worked best for my students was the Five Whys. So, when I began teaching screenwriting, using this same approach to story was a no-brainer. I demand my students deploy the Five Whys when developing their narratives, not only to look for ways to enrich their story, but to ensure empathy is at the center of it. This root cause approach serves story development so well.

The Five Whys is an interrogation technique used to examine a particular problem.

SLIDE The Japanese founder of Toyota Industries, Sakichi Toyoda, invented this technique in the 1930s as a means to problem solve. From the article “5 Whys: the Ultimate Root Cause Analysis Tool,” Amar Bhide writes: “One of the key factors for successful implementation of the technique is to make an informed decision. This means that the decision-making process should be based on an insightful understanding of what is actually happening on the work floor.” How can we as writers know where to take a story or even how to build the tension, if we don’t know why our characters are doing what they’re doing, or why they are going where they are going. What is the super catalyst to the conflict of this draft? We need to get to the root cause of their actions. We can call it cause-and-effect. We can call it the domino theory. The South Park guys, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, fit the words “but” and “therefore” between their beats. Whatever it is, I make it a point to teach my young writers how to drill down into their characters and root out the cause of their problem.

If they have done their character work, everything that happens from that very first beat will drive into the next logical beat because it has to, because the character's need is clear and actionable and rooted in a fully excavated original sin.

SIX.

SLIDE There was a knock at the door of Video American that startled the robber. I would find out later that it was his look-out, his driver. **SLIDE** He was telling the robber to hurry up. So he took the gun from the back of my head, and pushed up off of me, which is when he lost his balance and stepped wide to regain his center of gravity. But he lost control of his balance and stumbled, his boot accidentally stepping on my hand. Then he said, "Oh geez, I'm sorry." It was an involuntary reaction. A defense mechanism, just like I had done, allowing him time to process this weighty moment. It was the most honest and true part of his character I had seen. It was the moment I knew I wasn't going to die. His whole badass robber persona dropped away, and who he really was came back to the surface.

He tried to regain control and barked at me to get up. **SLIDE** He rushed me back behind the counter to the stacks of videos. He ordered me to kneel a final time and count to 100 and if I stopped, he would blow my brains out, but this time, I didn't believe him. I knew his mask had come down and his empathy had shown itself.

He left and I never saw him again.

SEVEN.

SLIDE When we finished workshoping for the day and were packing up to leave our classroom, we were reminded of what had happened several hours earlier.

SLIDE

“Hey, professor, why do you think he did it?” a student asked. This was their first why.

“You really want me to use the Five Whys on the kid running from the cops?” I asked.

The room got excited to finally have the Five Whys aimed at someone other than them.

“I think he got scared,” I said.

The student who wrote the drug dealer torturing the dirty cop shouted, a little too quickly, “WHY?” This was the second.

“Because he was gonna get in trouble and he didn’t want to get in trouble,” I said.

“Why?” the class shouted. This was their third.

“Because he’d have to face the consequences, legally and financially and parentally, and from how fast he was running in the video, he’s likely afraid of his parents most,” I said.

“Why?” they asked a fourth time.

“Because legal and financial restitution have a beginning, middle and end. Parental anger has no end and so I’d say he really ran cuz he was afraid of what his mom and/or dad would do when they found out,” I said.

“Why?” They asked a fifth and final time.

“Because they have never cared about his feelings or why he behaves the way he does, and only ever focus on how his feelings and subsequent actions impacted them. They lack empathy, and so he acts out for attention, when all he really wants is someone to ask him how he’s doing,” I said.

EIGHT.

SLIDE When the cops finally arrived at Video American, they took my statement, dusted for fingerprints, and kept asking me to tell them what kind of shoes he was wearing. Apparently, there had been a string of robberies in the area, and the robber kept changing his look, except for his shoes.

“They always forget to change their shoes,” a police officer said, in a very serious way that sounded like a bad movie.

“He wore Timberland boots,” I said, which confirmed their suspicions that it was the same person responsible for all the robberies.

“Due of the frequency of the robberies and clustered nature of the crimes,” the officer continued. “It looks like this person is fundraising. They likely need money for something very serious and they need it fast.” He said this all sounding so very cool. Then he said, “just like the rest of us.” The cop wrote notes down on a pad of paper and returned it to a pocket. “I have one more question for you,” he said. “What kind of gun did he have?”

“I don’t know much about guns.” I said. Then add: “I was less concerned about the type of gun he had and more concerned that he was holding it to my head.”

SLIDE Then in flash the cop pulled his Glock from its holster, like he was trying to impress me with his speed and aimed it at me. “Is this how he held it? Look at my gun? Did his gun look like this?” he said. Then he turned the gun sideways. “Or did he hold it like this?”

NINE.

SLIDE In short, I believe, storytelling is empathy.

From her book *The Empathy Exams*, **SLIDE** Leslie Jamison writes: “Empathy comes from the Greek *empathia* — *em* (into) and *pathos* (feeling) — a penetration, a kind of travel. It

suggests you enter another person's pain as you'd enter another country, through immigration and customs, border crossing by way of query: What grows where you are? What are the laws? What animals graze there?"

The late, great actor Michael K. Williams, **SLIDE** famous for his portrayal of the Robin Hood-esque character Omar Little in *The Wire*, said of his profession: "I use my job to engage empathy and compassion for people society might stereotype or ostracize."

From a speech he gave in 2005, film critic Roger Ebert **SLIDE** said the following of empathy: "We all are born with a certain package. We are who we are: where we were born, who we were born as, how we were raised. We're kind of stuck inside that person, and the purpose of civilization and growth is to be able to reach out and empathize a little bit with other people. And for me, the movies are like a machine that generates empathy. It lets you understand a little bit more about different hopes, aspirations, dreams and fears. It helps us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us."

And so, this is my mission. Working with new and young writers to reverse engineer their stories. To work backwards. Into the unknown country that their characters inhabit and discover the root cause of their conflict and pinpoint the unknown need that requires action for them to feel human, which is what we all do from the moment we open our eyes and step into our day—taking action to feel free from pain.

SLIDE

THE END.