



**THE
JOURNEY
IS THE
REWARD**

**15 YEARS OF BLOG POSTS ON
PRODUCTIVITY, LIFE, AND LOVE**

by HILLARY RETTIG
WWW.HILLARYRETTIG.COM

The Journey is the Reward

15 Years of Blog Posts on
Productivity, Life, and Love

by Hillary Rettig

The Journey is the Reward

15 Years of Blog Posts on
Productivity, Life, and Love

by Hillary Rettig

www.hillaryrettig.com
hillary@hillaryrettig.com

(c 2006- 2021 Hillary Rettig.
All rights reserved.

Preface

*I started blogging in 2006, after the publication of my first book, *The Lifelong Activist*. And I've published nearly three hundred posts in the fifteen years since then. I blog to stay connected with my audience, but also because blogging is my laboratory. It's where I try out different ideas, examine different premises, interrogate other's work. Not every post I write gets published: sometimes the premise doesn't hold or the pieces don't gel. But most do.*

I also blog because it's fun. While books take years of intense labor to write, a blog post usually takes anywhere from a day to two weeks. It's a little vacation from the big project, in other words. And the stakes, obviously, are much lower.

*The downside to blogging is its evanescence—even great posts can be quickly forgotten. But some posts you want to be remembered—which is why, on the occasion of a new Website overhaul, and on the eve of the publication of my latest book, *Productivity is Power: 5 Liberating Practices for Undergraduates*, I’m happy to present this compilation of my best blog posts from the past fifteen years. I’ve enjoyed revisiting them, and I hope you enjoy (re)reading them!*

Many thanks to the talented Juan Jaume who designed and produced this ebook.

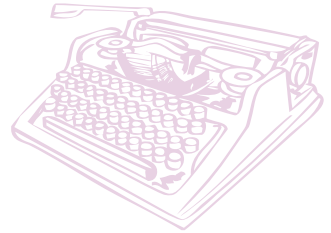
And many thanks to you for your interest in my work,

Hillary

hillary@hillaryrettig.com
<https://www.hillaryrettig.com>

PS - I’ve gone over each post and “refreshed” it by updating links and clarifying a few dated references. Some of the posts may refer to a chapter in one of my books.

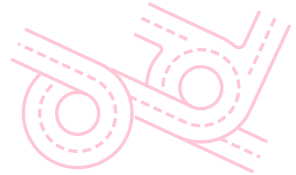
Productivity and Time Management



The Key Insight: Joyce Carol Oates and Catullus on Writing Productivity	3
What Joyful Productivity Looks Like: The “Woodland Trail” Metaphor	6
The 14 Rules of Prolific Writing	9
Slow Down to Speed Up! Also, Bonus Moving Story	13
Use Speed to Overcome Writer’s Block Greed may not be good, but speed sure is	17
Overcome Procrastination by Lowering Your Energy of Activation	22
Are You Waiting for Ideal Conditions to Start Your Project?	26
Use the Writercopter to Speed Your Writing	29
Productivity Secrets of a “Supergenius”	34
Want to Get More Work Done? Then Show it Early and Often	37
How to Live Your Summer Life All Year Long	41

2**Perfectionism**

Harry Potter and the Boggart Perfectionism	48
Harper Lee, “Second Novel Syndrome,” and Situational Perfectionism	53
The Difference Between High Standards and Perfectionism	57
Perfectionism in the “Tiger Mom” and “The King’s Speech”	61
This is Called “Situational Perfectionism”	65
Let’s Talk About “Situational Perfectionism”	69
When a Success Leaves You *Less* Able to Do Your Work	73
Dave Barry on How to Cope With Post-Pulitzer Prize Situational Perfectionism	76
Beware Post-Summer Situational Perfectionism!	78
Nonperfectionism in a Single Sentence	81
Procrastination, Perfectionism and Addiction	84

3**The “Middles”
Series**

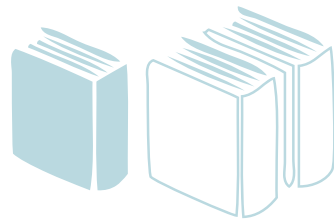
What To Do If You Are Stuck in the Middle of a Project	96
Why the Middles of Projects are Tough (Part 2): Plus, How to Have Fun Revising!	100
Why the Middles of Projects are Tough (Part 3): Middles Have Middles!	104

4**For Students and Academics**

Lessons from a Struggling Math Student	110
A Symposium on Oppression in the Academy	117
Four More Reasons People Quit the Ph.D.	123
Advice for Academics (Graduate Student and Faculty)	130

5**Productivity During Tough Times**

On Trying to Write While Sitting in the Midst of the Battle of Hogwartst	140
Self-Care Now More Than Ever!	146

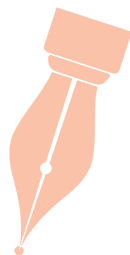
6**Career Building**

Success and Loss	152
How to Cope With Clueless Questions, Crass Comments, and Crazy Conjectures	155
Amanda Palmer on Artistic Legitimacy	162

Seth Godin and Jennifer Crusie on Artistic Legitimacy	168
“The Language of Loss for the Jobless”	174
Six Things You Should Never Say to a Photographer (Or, if You’re a Photographer, Never Say to Yourself!)	177
Do You Suffer From Marketer’s Block?	182

7

Interviews



Exclusive! John Scalzi’s Time Management and Career Tips	192
Exclusive: Sharon Shinn’s Time Management Tips!	201

8

Parenting



Parenting Is Not a Zero Sum Game!	213
How to Help Your Kids Kick the Video Game Habit	220
Nonperfectionist Parenting During a Pandemic	228

9**Dogs**

Dogs Don't Like Perfectionism Either!	238
Furball Friday: Billy's Studio Shots	242
Homage to Rosie and Cinnamon	244
RIP Billy Dawg 2003? – 2019	249

10**Personal**

In Which I Advise a Baby	254
Live From Kalamazoo: A New Shot at Love	260
My Dad's Finest Hour	265
My Big Fat Vegan Kidney Donation	268

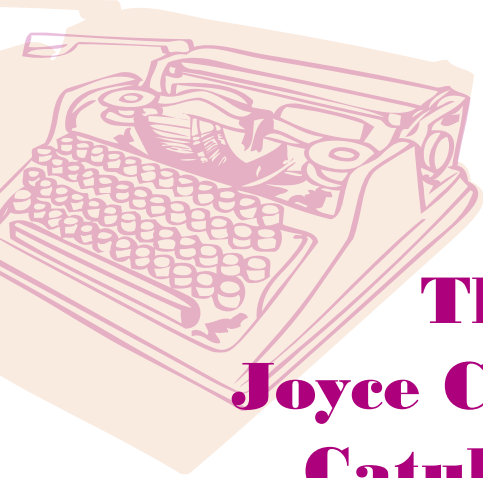


1



PRODUCTIVITY
AND TIME MANAGEMENT





PRODUCTIVITY
AND TIME MANAGEMENT

The Key Insight: Joyce Carol Oates and Catullus on Writing Productivity

Some writers seem to have been born with an understanding of how to be productive. Here's the super-prolific Joyce Carol Oates in her 1978 Paris Review interview:

“One must be pitiless about this matter of “mood.” In a sense, the writer will create the mood. If art is, as I believe it to be, a genuinely transcendental function – a means by which we rise out of limited, parochial states of mind – then it should not matter very much what states of mind or emotion we are in. Generally I’ve found this to be true: I have forced myself to begin writing when I’ve been utterly exhausted, when I’ve felt my soul as thin as a playing card, when nothing

has seemed worth enduring for another five minutes...and somehow the activity of writing changes everything."

This fits in with the idea that the writing life, and each individual piece of writing, should be a journey without a fixed destination. You can't even set a nebulous goal, like "to sell" or "to write well" – because even a nebulous goal contradicts the very point of the exercise. (And the liberated, creative mind won't stand for it – it will just shut down. That mind demands freedom, and balks at control.) As Flaubert said, "Success must be a consequence and never a goal."

Or, as Catullus put it more 2,000 years ago: "And so, have them for yourself, whatever kind of book it is, and whatever sort, o patron Muse."



This is the central insight: that if we trust in writing – and our writing, specifically – it will take us where we need to go.

This shouldn't be news. After all, experts use journaling to help everyone from war victims to kids in jail to cancer survivors. And we all know that writing expands the soul (both

our own and society's). But in a world soaked in perfectionism and other anti-productive ills, the message often gets reversed and we're taught that only after we write something "worthwhile" do we earn the right to feel good.

The goal of productivity work is thus not just to help you reduce or eliminate internal and external barriers to productivity, but to get you to trust in the process of writing, and in yourself – and in the specific knowledge that you are not, in fact, lacking, but have everything you need to succeed.

What Joyful Productivity Looks Like: The “Woodland Trail” Metaphor

Picture your writing (or other work) session as a stroll down a beautiful, sun-dappled woodland path. The path is wide and flat, the air warm and inviting, and on either side of you are banks of friendly plants alive with twittering birds. You’re having a marvelous time, and are moving at a relaxed, yet efficient pace – almost with a bit of a strut.



All of a sudden someone pops up out of the underbrush and joins you on your path: it's your spouse, full of opinions on your current piece of writing.

You walk on for a bit, your spouse yammering in your ear, not just about the writing, now, but about he/she wishes the house were better maintained and how you two never go out any more. It's an unpleasant distraction, but you're still mostly enjoying your walk.



Then, someone else pops up – your parents, who are worried about how your writing will reflect on them.

And then your siblings parachute down onto the path, asking when are you going to get a real job, and aren't you embarrassed to be driving around in that old car?

Then, an old teacher or boss pops up, reminding you of how, "you really don't do dialog very well."

And an editor who, twenty years ago, described a story of yours as "jejune." (Yes, people do remember cruel comments for decades!)

And the author of a newspaper article you recently read

that proclaimed that the market for epic family sagas, like the one you happen to be writing, is “dead.” Etc.

Soon, you’re walking at the center of a clamorous crowd, none of whom you’ve invited. Naturally, you’ll have a hard time working in the midst of their harping, carping and negativity.

The prolific handle things differently. They decide, with absolute authority (get it? author-ity), who comes on their trail, and how long they can stay. You’re only allowed on if they want you on, and the minute you’re no longer an asset to their process, you’re gone. (I like to imagine that “gone” being either in the form of a vaudeville hook whisking the offender off stage right, or a giant boot sending him into orbit.)

And no free passes: everyone has to pass the “asset” test, including partners, parents, kids, and “important” teachers, editors and the like. And those who fail the test a few times permanently lose their right to apply for entry. They’re banished, baby.

And so the prolific have a wonderful time strolling peacefully and productivity through the hours, days and years of their work.



PRODUCTIVITY
AND TIME MANAGEMENT

The 14 Rules of Prolific Writing

1. The proper goal for all writing projects should be to “Get it done.” (Not fabulousness, comprehensiveness, to create a best seller, “revolutionize my field,” impress my advisor/family, make a fortune, etc. See Rule #13 on Quality, below.)
2. Use a speedy, free-writing, free-revising technique. Aim for a large number of quick drafts where you make a few easy changes, versus a small number of “megadrafts” where you try to change every single thing that needs changing. (The latter technique wastes time and catalyzes perfectionism.) The proper number of drafts is “as many as it takes.”

3. Use Anne Lamott's "one inch picture frame" technique, from her book **Bird by Bird**, to avoid overwhelm: "All I have to do is write down as much as I can see through a one-inch picture frame. This is all I have to bite off for the time being. All I am going to do right now, for example, is write that one paragraph."
4. When you run into a problem, don't stop and ponder; solve it via writing about it.
5. Don't research during your writing periods: it's procrastination mimicking productive work.
6. Don't work linearly: view your work in two or three dimensions and use the "writercopter."
7. Expect, and soldier through, the "murky middle." This, this, and this tell you how.
8. Avoid overworking the beginning of your project at the expense of the rest by devoting a third of your writing sessions to the beginning, a third to the middle, and a third to the end.
9. Reduce your fear of showing your work by showing it "early and often." But be selective about whom you show it to—you won't benefit from cruel or clueless criticism.
10. Don't pathologize normal writing incidents. Everyone has bad days when they don't get much done, and everyone produces the occasional subpar piece. When either of those happen to you, it doesn't mean you're an unfit writer—just normal.

11. Relieve physical and mental monotony by introducing a physical component to your work. Some writers create a colorful wall chart; others, a scrapbook illustrated with magazine cutouts. Sometimes, when I'm really stuck on a piece, I print the whole thing out and do an old-school cut and paste with actual scissors and a glue stick.
12. Work typically stalls for one of these four reasons: (1) perfectionism, (2) ambivalence, (3) you don't know enough about what you're trying to write about, or (4) you're trying to force the writing in a direction it doesn't want to go. If your problem is one of the last two, journaling analytically about the problem—i.e., answering the question, "Why won't this piece do what I want?" Or, "Why can't I figure out what to write next?"—often helps dramatically.
13. Always focus on quantity, not quality: quality is an emergent property. Also read this. And remember that Flaubert said that, "Success must be a consequence and never a goal."
14. Remember that the key to joyful productivity is to exercise dominion over your creative process. Prolificness is characterized by freedom, flexibility, and an utter willingness to throw away whatever you are working on and start over. This can be a terrifying prospect to someone who is perfectionist, because perfectionism is a mindset of scarcity—not enough ideas, not enough

time, not enough help, etc. Escape from that stultifying mindset, however, and you'll find yourself in a world of abundance where nothing is wasted. (The stuff you throw out will have served its purpose in improving this project, and you'll probably also wind up using it later.)

It is possible, in other words, to evolve to a state of near-constant inspiration and “flow,” and if you trust in yourself and the process, it won't take long to get there.



Slow Down to Speed Up! Also, Bonus Moving Story

Sorry for the hiatus – we wound up moving on somewhat short notice. Now we’re (mostly) settled in a bee-you-ti-ful new apartment (still in Kalamazoo), so it’s time for another newsletter.

After the move, I was surrounded by mountains of boxes, mountain *ranges* of boxes. It would have been easy to get overwhelmed, but I made a deliberate decision to stay calm because panic never helps. (As the late, great problem solving guru Jerry Weinberg said, “The problem isn’t the problem. The problem is your reaction to the problem.”)

Our reflex, when faced with an overwhelming and/or unpleasant task, is often to speed up, with the goal of

getting it done as fast as possible. But that’s actually the opposite of what you should do.

When we rush, the task not only gets more unpleasant, we’re also more likely to make mistakes.

Instead, you want to slow way down and savor the details. Treat every box (or paragraph, or piece of paperwork, or other work unit) as if it’s the only one, and really take your time. When you do that, the work gets pleasanter and easier, and you get a better result. (This approach is similar to Anne Lamott’s recommendation, in Bird by Bird, that you avoid overwhelm by looking at your work through a metaphorical “one-inch picture frame.”)

In my case, slowing down helped me approach my boxes in a relaxed and efficient mood. (Listening to an audiobook while I unpacked helped.) And a scant few hours later, my seemingly insurmountable “mountain ranges” had mostly melted away.

Speaking of the move, I can’t resist sharing the following story of experience triumphing over brute force:

When I hired the moving company I specifically requested, “experienced movers who are good communicators,” but wasn’t too surprised when the usual “three young guys”

showed up to do the job. They were very nice and very strong, but ignored my advice to start with the couch. (A big one that needed to go out a small door, then down a steep and twisty staircase.) Instead, they saved it for near the end of the move and, possibly because of a combination of inexperience and fatigue, got it jammed in the apartment door. (And we were all stuck in the apartment behind it!)

They were pretty frustrated—not least because they knew someone had moved the couch up into the apartment, and so it was obviously capable of coming back down—and I did my best to stay calm and give them space. But after more than half an hour of watching them struggle, I finally said, “Guys, you need to call someone.” They resisted for a bit, wanting to solve the problem themselves, then made the call.

A few minutes later, an older guy – it was impossible not to think of him as “the dad” – drove up. He took one look at our jam, snapped on a pair of grippy gloves, and said, “Let’s go.” Ten minutes later, the couch was out of the building and in the truck.

Speaking as an older person in a culture that often deprecates or dismisses people my age, it was a vindicating triumph of experience!

Part of “dad’s” technique, by the way, involved slowing WAYYYYYYYYY down during crucial junctures, to the point where they were manipulating the couch (it seemed) one centimeter at a time.

So the next time you’re facing an overwhelming mountain of work, or a seemingly intractable jam of any kind, try taking it slow.

Happy summer! And speaking of which, here’s one of my all-time favorite pieces: [How to Live Your Summer Life All Year Long](#) . And here’s [Fast Company’s writeup](#) of the technique.

Use Speed to Overcome Writer's Block

**Greed may not be good,
but speed sure is**

It was only when I got into this line of work that I understood the meaning of the axiom “he who hesitates is lost.” Procrastination – the fear-based inner force that wants you not to complete your projects – will latch onto any feelings of uncertainty or hesitation and amplify them until you can no longer do your work.

One method for beating procrastination, therefore, is to practice a Zenlike detachment from your work. You want to, at the appointed time, glide emotionlessly over to your desk and sit down and commence work. Just commence, without drama or hesitation.

Emotionless? You ask. What about having good feelings, like excitement? Isn't it good to be excited over one's work? Well, yes, but the problem with excitement is that it often linked to the expectation that you're going to have a fantastic (<- perfectionist!) writing session – and then, if you don't, the excitement is quickly replaced by despair. That's an addictive cycle that ignores Flaubert's dictum that "success must be a consequence and never a goal," and feeds your perfectionism.

Instead of riding up and down the emotional roller coaster, therefore, practice Zen detachment. Your work should simply be your work: something you do. It's okay to feel pride, satisfaction, and even joy, in your writing achievements – and once you relate to your work in the proper way you should start to rack up a lot of achievements. But that kind of authentic self-appreciation shouldn't be confused with the high of an addictive emotional cycle.

Zen practitioners would probably say that the more precise aim is to be attached to your work but not to any particular outcome from it.

Let's talk more about speed. Productive people write quickly in three senses:

(1) They write without much distraction. They don't, for

instance, stop to check their emails or text messages every few words or paragraphs. They don't even stop to look something up – although they might make a quick note of it so that they don't forget to look it up later. But rather than interrupt their flow, they will leave a hole in the manuscript and just keep writing.

In contrast, people who are underproductive write in fits and starts, which is not only problematic in terms of time use but constantly interrupts the creative flow.

(2) Fast writers also work relentlessly to simplify their writing (and other) tasks, so they can get them done fast and move onto something else. They don't sacrifice quality, but – and this is important – they make a judgment as to what level of quality is required for each task. (As opposed to perfectionists, who often assume they need to achieve the maximum level of quality in all aspects of every job.) When they sit down to a project, they reflexively ask questions such as these:

- What parts can I eliminate?
- How can I simplify the remaining parts?
- What resources do I have that can help me finish?
- Whom can I enlist to help me?

This is yet another case where mentors are crucial, be-

cause they can help you answer those questions. Simplifying projects is very important not just because simplifying in itself saves time, but also because you're less likely to be afraid of, and therefore procrastinate on, simple projects compared with complex ones.

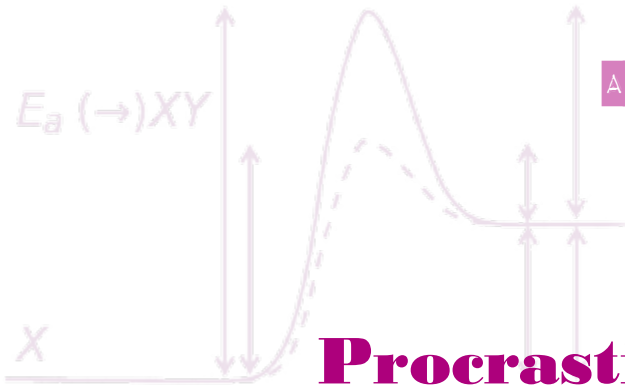
It's easy for even adept non-procrastinators to fall into the perfectionist trap of overcomplicating their work. Recently, I was working on a query letter for a book I'm writing with a coauthor. (A query letter is what authors send to agents asking for representation.) My coauthor is kind of glamorous, so I initially thought I would include photos and his biography with the query, to strengthen the pitch. But those were holding the project up, and eventually I realized that the letter would be fine without them – plus, if the agent does indicate interest we will be more motivated to provide the rest.

For a more trivial example, it took me years to break the habit of writing formal salutations and closings on a lot of my emails. It's not so much about saving time – although as someone who places a high value on time, and who sends a lot of emails, the accrued time savings is meaningful – it's the head space. By eliminating the unnecessary, I am better able to focus on the important.

(3) Finally, fast writers share their drafts. Perfectionists hold

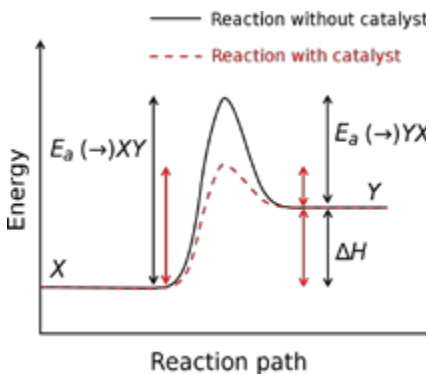
onto their drafts forever, while non-perfectionists send them out quickly for feedback. “I think the middle section is weak,” they might write in their cover note, “what do you think? Can you see a way to improve it?” Whereas the perfectionist would rather die than send something out with a weak middle section, and so they hold onto the piece, compulsively revising it – or, not touching it – for weeks, months, or maybe years.

Practice writing fast; practice pruning (or eliminating) tasks; practice relaxing your quality standards; and practice showing your work early and often. Those are habits that will pay off hugely in terms of saved time and increased productivity.



Overcome Procrastination by Lowering Your Energy of Activation

I've been obsessed lately with the concept of energy of activation (E_a) – the energy you put into a system to get it to change.



From Wikipedia.
Note how you wind up with more potential (the second plateau) than when you started out (the first).

Without E_a , the chemicals just sit there.

With it, they spurt and fizz and combine and do all kinds of other jazzy things. Remember catalysts, the chemicals

that speed reactions? What they actually do is lower E_a so reactions can proceed more easily.

If there's a task you procrastinate on, try reducing its "Ea" by, (1) optimizing your environment, and (2) getting some of the preconditions out of the way earlier.

If it's writing, make sure that the sound level and decor of your room are optimized. Also, that your equipment is well running. Writing is hard enough without having to simultaneously struggle with too much noise (or quiet), disorganization, a flaky PC, etc. Also, reorganize your schedule so that writing gets your best time and attention, and you're not battling fatigue or distraction.

If it's exercise, try putting on your exercise gear first thing in the morning so that that's one less hurdle when it actually comes time to exercise. Or, if driving to the gym is a hassle, buy some exercise tapes (www.collagevideo.com has hundreds, for all tastes and needs) and try exercising at home.

If it's a phone call or appointment or some paperwork you're dreading, get someone to help you with it – or even to just sit with you, or call you before and while you're doing it. Because feelings of panic and abandonment often underlie procrastination, simply just having someone else

involved is often enough to lower Ea.

Lowering the Ea is often like magic: you do it and suddenly the insurmountable barrier becomes surmountable. And then, afterwards, you're left wondering what the heck the problem was in the first place!

Perfectionists, of course, disdain this approach, preferring, instead, to beat themselves into submission. "I should be able to write when I'm sick / the kids are noisy / the computer's flaky, dammit! And I'm going to sit here until I do!"

Ugh. Such a coercive attitude inevitably leads to procrastination, which is a rebellion against the coercion and the trap of unreasonable expectations.

Nonperfectionists would never bother with such an unproductive tactic. If they're sick, they *promptly* go back to bed. If the kids are noisy, they *quickly* shush them and/or make plans for babysitting or an outside writing space. If the computer's busted they *immediately* get it fixed or a new one. If it's a tedious or tricky project, they're *instantly* on the phone asking for help. In other words, their reflex, when faced with a difficult task or even any task at all, is to do stuff that lowers Ea.

Perfectionism, by the way, is the opposite of a catalyst: it's

a “blocker” or “inhibitor” that raises E_a . It does that not just by increasing your fears, but by inventing prolific rationalizations and justifications for non-work.



PRODUCTIVITY
AND TIME MANAGEMENT

Are You Waiting for Ideal Conditions to Start Your Project?

Recently, someone mentioned she was waiting to clear “a big chunk of time” before starting a project.

Other things people wait for are:

- The kids to be in school (or out of the house entirely).
- A better work space (either at home or elsewhere).
- More money.
- Retirement.
- “To do more research.”



While there is often some logic to waiting, it's usually better just to get started. For one thing, the impulse to wait is usually partly a response to perfectionist fears of

failure, success, and showing the work. (And, often, no matter how well rationalized, it's **entirely** a response to perfectionism.)

So don't wait: do your work in short intervals — even five or ten minutes at a time, if that's all you have. (Here's the technique.) You'll not only vanquish any perfectionist fears, but transform your work from a cold theoretical endeavor into a warm, living project that you'll be inspired to continue working on.

In fact, people who do this often discover that, while they might like the extra time, better office, etc., they don't need it. By breathing life into their project, they rekindled their passion for it, and so can easily blast past barriers that formerly seemed insurmountable.

It's imperative, however, that you approach your five or ten minutes nonperfectionistically. If, while you're working, you're constantly thinking, "This is ridiculous. I'm not getting anywhere. I hate what I'm doing," etc., that will defeat the point of the exercise.

(And, absent perfectionism, you will probably be amazed at how much you can accomplish in even five or ten minutes.)

To be clear, there are definitely times it makes sense to put off a project, such as when you're already overwhelmed with stressful obligations, or if it is simply a lower priority than everything else you're currently working on. But **if there's a project you're itching to work on, and your main barrier to doing so is simple busy-ness, try to get in at least one good five- or ten-minute interval each day.**

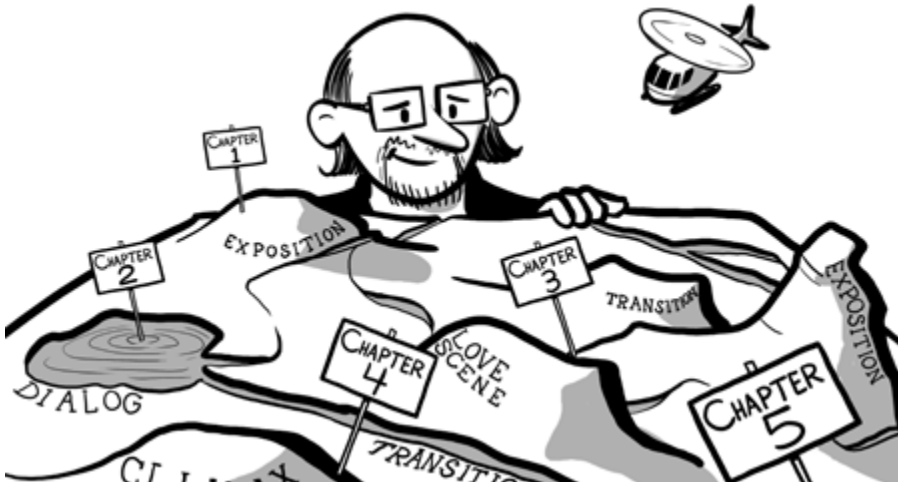


Use the Writercopter to Speed Your Writing

From Hillary Rettig's book *The Seven Secrets of the Prolific: The Definitive Guide to Overcoming Procrastination, Perfectionism and Writer's Block* (Infinite Art, August 2011). (c)2011 Hillary Rettig. All rights reserved. Permission granted to copy and distribute so long as this paragraph is included, and a link is provided back to www.HillaryRettig.com

Perfectionists tend to see their projects as long strings of words – and there's a natural tendency, when you have that viewpoint, to want to start at the beginning of a piece and write straight through till, "The End."

It's much more productive to view your work as a landscape that you're viewing from above, and whose topo-



graphic features include: hard parts, easy parts, exposition parts, dialog parts, visual description parts, parts involving Character A, parts involving Theme B, etc. Viewed like this, your project resembles an illustrated map, or maybe one of those miniature landscapes you see in museums, and it's now accessible to you in its totality. You are now, in other words, no longer looking at it from the meager and terrifying prospect of a point at the end of an endless string of words.

And now you can use a visualization tool I call the “writer-copter,” a mental helicopter that can transport you to any place in your piece. The moment you feel you’ve taken a particular piece of writing as far as you can, hop onto your copter and take it to another section that looks enticing. Work there until you run dry, and then reboard and hop to another part.

What if no part looks appealing? Try writing about the piece (see below). And in the unlikely event that that doesn't help, set the entire piece aside and let it marinate while you work on something else.

Writing might sometimes be difficult, but it should never be unpleasant; and if it is unpleasant – if you're feeling frustrated, bored or stuck – that's not an indication of any deficiency on your part, but simply the signal to move to another part of the project, or another project. While it's okay to practice "writing past the wall," i.e., sticking with a difficult section a bit longer than comfortable, don't perfectionistically dig in your heels and become an antagonist to yourself and your process.

The writercopter technique is similar to that used by the famously prolific Isaac Asimov, author or editor of more than 500 books:

"What if you get a writer's block?" (That's a favorite question.) I say, "I don't ever get one precisely because I switch from one task to another at will. If I'm tired of one project, I just switch to something else which, at the moment, interests me more." (from his memoir, *In Joy Still Felt*.)

Note Asimov's absolute sense of freedom and dominion (author-ity!) over his work – expressed not in grandiose

terms, but the simple ability to do whatever he wants, whenever he wants. And, of course, the total lack of blame, shame, compulsion and other perfectionist traits.

Nonlinear writing obviously goes hand-in-hand with free writing; and using the techniques together should powerfully speed your writing. What's more, the process is accelerative, since the more easy parts of your project that you finish, the easier the hard parts will get. (By writing "around" the hard parts, you're illuminating them and solving problems related to them.)

You can combine nonlinear writing with Anne Lamott's famous "one-inch picture frame" technique from *Bird by Bird* to get through even the toughest piece of writing. To combat overwhelm, Lamott reminds herself that:

All I have to do is to write down as much as I can see through a one-inch picture frame...All I'm going to do right now, for example, is write that one paragraph that sets the story in my hometown, in the late fifties when the trains were still running.

I myself have gotten through very tough sections of writing (meaning, sections where I felt a lot of resistance to the writing – because the sections themselves are neither easy nor hard, but just writing) by switching back and forth

between the difficult work and an easier one, doing “one-inch picture frame”-sized pieces of the tough section, and longer stretches of the easy one. The long stretches actually become a reward, in this context, which is itself a lovely development: writing not as chore, but reward.

Take these techniques to their limit, as I assume Asimov did, and you develop a very light touch around your work. You’re hopping everywhere in the writercopter, not in a distracted way, but in a focused, effective way – and the writing is almost never a struggle, and the words just pile up.

The alternative is: you struggle with grim determination to write the piece linearly. And so you write a page or two and...wham! You’re at a hard part and you stop dead. And because you don’t know what else to do, you just keep throwing yourself against that wall – until procrastination steps in to “save” you from your predicament.



Productivity Secrets of a “Supergenius”

A friend was discussing her fears around her writing, and, in particular, of taking on bigger projects than she could handle, when she came up with a great comparison: “I feel like Wile E. Coyote when he goes off the edge of a cliff. Then he looks down and realizes he’s gone too far, but it’s too late, and down he goes.”

She was conveying a real sense of fear. (Falling off a cliff, even in a cartoon, is scary!) And yet...something about the comparison felt off. I thought for a moment, and then pointed out:

“But he always survives the fall, doesn’t he?”

She paused. “Uh, yes. I guess he does.”

“And then he goes on with the chase?”

“Yes!”



I think it's fair to say my friend's attitude shifted at that moment.

In fact, her comparison was more apt than she realized. **As a creator, it's actually your job to “run off the cliff”—i.e., take risks.** And that, by definition, means you'll fall (a.k.a., fail) a lot. It's essential you not overreact to those failures when they happen. Even better, stop looking at them as failures! They're just ordinary parts of the creative process, and a creative life.

Just like Wile E., you pick yourself up, brush yourself off, and keep on going.

Here are two ways you can improve on Wile E:

- 1) Hopefully you can learn a bit from the experience so as not to repeat the same mistake over and over. (For a self-proclaimed supergenius, he never seems to learn!)
- 2) Keep going, and sooner or later you're likely to “catch your Roadrunner”—meaning, create something you're proud of, and that you feel was worth the struggle.

So, unlike poor Wile E., you can eventually expect a happy ending!

Do you find inspiration from an unusual fictional or historical character? If so, I'd love to hear about it! Please share it as a comment below, or I'd love to hear from you on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).

BTW – I knew I couldn't be the first to derive productivity lessons from Wile E., and sure enough I'm not.

Want to Get More Work Done? Then Show it Early and Often

There are many techniques that will help you boost your writing output, but one of the best is to show your work early and often:

- Show drafts.
- Show chunks (paragraphs and pages).
- And even show individual sentences and clauses. (“Hey, what do you think of this metaphor...” Or, “Super proud of how I framed this...”)

Show them to: colleagues, bosses, and subordinates. Also, critique buddies, workshopers, editors, and agents. Also, friends and family members who get what you’re doing. And, of course, your audience.

Perfectionist writers are terrified of having their work seen and judged, so they keep it private—and, in doing so, create a “wall” between themselves and potential readers and critics.

They hide behind that wall, endlessly writing and revising, but never finishing or submitting or publishing. (Sometimes they don't write at all, since that's an even better technique for remaining unseen and unjudged!)



The problem is: the more a writer hides, the more terrifying showing his work becomes, until the wall becomes enormous and insurmountable.

In contrast, showing early and often helps “perforate” and eventually eliminate the wall.

And that tends to speed the entire writing process, from conceptualization and drafting through to revising, submitting, and publishing. You become bolder and more resilient—a.k.a., less perfectionist—and you also get catalyzing feedback and support.

This technique is, of course, congruent with 21st century marketing via social media. We're long past the days when writers sequestered their work until it was fully polished and edited. These days, readers want to share your process via social media, and maybe even be included in it.

So, show your work early and often.

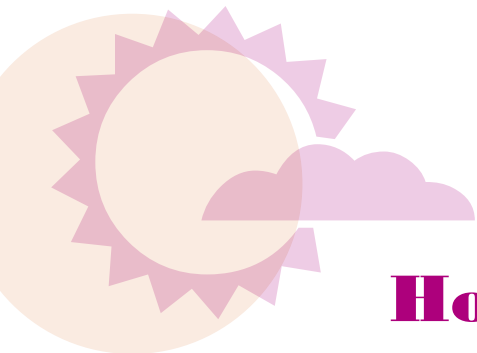
Just be careful whom you show it to, however, because there's no point in exposing yourself to callous or clueless feedback.

Maybe no social media at first, until you get more resilient. And extra points for telling your "showees" what response you want: e.g.,

- "I know this is a draft so I don't want detailed feedback on grammar and syntax. But let me know if the general idea works for you." Or,
- "I really dig this metaphor I came up with!!! Just wanted to share it with you; no reply needed." Or,
- "I'm really having trouble with this passage – any ideas?"

Eventually, you'll probably come to enjoy showing your work, and you'll probably also be able to write faster than you ever thought possible.






How to Live Your Summer Life All Year Long

Summer is a time for play, but what does your play tell you about the life you'd really like to be living? Many of us, during the summer:

- *Relax*
- *Get more athletic*
- *Get more sensual (Shakespeare didn't write **A Midwinter Night's Dream**, after all!)*
- *Interact more with nature, and*
- *Dress more casually and comfortably, at work and elsewhere.*



We also use our vacations to:

- 
- *Travel*
 - *Catch up on family and friend time, and*
 - *Make progress on an important goal (book, thesis, art, volunteerism, etc.)*

Why wait for summer to do all this? Or, asked another way: wouldn't it be wonderful if we could live more actively and authentically the rest of the year?

Of course there are barriers: notably, for many people, work (or school) and family responsibilities. But think about how big a role habit and convention may be playing in your situation:

- If you haven't taken a vacation in years (an American disease, it seems), find and learn from others who have.
- If you have been taking a vacation or other time off, find mentors who can help you extend and improve that experience.
- If you feel trapped by circumstances into living a life you don't particularly want, find and learn from others who share your values and have learned to live more authentically.

Here is an inspiring article by Janelle Nanos in Boston Magazine about ordinary people who are freeing themselves—and the planet—by living nonconventional, nonconsumerist lives.

“After defining ourselves for generations by our possessions—cars, houses, books, music—a dramatic cultural shift is under way. In the wake of a collapsed economy and a warming planet, what matters to a growing number of Americans is not so much ownership as access.” Nanos heralds this as: “A powerful new force in modern life: the sharing economy.”

And here’s Leo Babauta’s classic Simple Living Manifesto, from Zenhabits.net .

“A simple life has a different meaning and a different value for every person. For me, it means eliminating all but the essential, eschewing chaos for peace, and spending your time doing what’s important to you. It means getting rid of many of the things you do so you can spend time with people you love and do the things you love. It means getting rid of the clutter so you are left with only that which gives you value.”

(If you’ve got a favorite resource about living more simply and/or happily, please share it in the comments.)

Achieving Authenticity

To live more authentically, organize your life around that goal. That's a time management endeavor, and, like many such, can be challenging. You might, for instance:

- Make changes in your personal lifestyle and habits
- Request your family and friends make changes
- Ask your boss for additional time off or to switch to part-time work. (If your boss is wholly unsupportive you may need to switch jobs.)
- Give up commitments you or others value, but that are not central to your goals or mission. Or even,
- Move.

However, authenticity is worth all of these sacrifices. Do you really want to spend all year waiting for the two or three weeks you can finally live your authentic life? And do that year after year, for the entire brief span you're on earth?

Also remember that living inauthentically (which often means living in denial) is exhausting! It takes huge time and energy. It also hurts; and sometimes, and perhaps oftener than we realize, it kills, through depression, anxiety, addiction, or grief.

Many times we're constrained from moving forward because we're not sure how others will react. It's worth noting that nearly everyone I encounter who has shared his or her dream with others got a lot more support and cooperation than anticipated. It's a huge gift to share your dream because it helps the person you're sharing with reconnect with her own dreams. And it's a very common mistake to underestimate the willingness of those around us to help.

Remember that even though authenticity is a crucial goal, you should never get perfectionist about it! Most progress is made in baby steps, and if you treat yourself with harsh severity, or relentlessly judge and deprecate your progress, you come close to defeating the whole point!

The first steps to freeing yourself are: (a) visualizing that freedom, (b) planning for it, and (c) clearing abundant time for achieving it. Summer provides an excellent opportunity for getting started on all three—and although that might sound like “work,” I guarantee that, in the process of doing it, you'll also have a great time.





2



PERFECTIONISM





Harry Potter and the Boggart Perfectionism

Harry Potter fans recall boggarts as creatures who live in dark household spaces like cupboards and closets and who, when you encounter one, take on the appearance of whatever it is you are most afraid of. In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, there's a great scene where Professor Lupin and his students provoke a classroom boggart into repeatedly changing appearance:

- To terrorized student Neville Longbottom, it appears as Severus Snape in full glower.
- To arachnophobic Ron Weasley, it appears as a gigantic spider.
- And to ultra-perfectionist Hermione Granger, it appears as Professor McGonagall telling her she “failed everything.”

Perfectionism works the same way! It will not just manifest itself as your worst professional fear, but if you do manage to dispel that fear, it will gladly morph into any other fear you might have.



Boggart Snape:
Pre- and Post
Riddikulus!

Some forms your perfectionism boggart might take include:

- “My work is unoriginal.”
- “My insights are mundane.”
- “I can’t do characters.”
- “My book won’t sell.”
- “I’ve got to get an A!”
- “I’ve got to get this done NOW!”
- “If I don’t succeed, I’ll be a loser.”

But underneath, it’s just plain old perfectionism, a kind of professional trauma that manifests itself in harsh

self-judgements, an over-focus on product (versus process), an over-reliance on external validation (versus intrinsic rewards), shortsightedness, pathologizing of the normal work process, dichotomizations, invidious comparisons, etc.

You may recall that the solution for a boggart is to impose your own image on it via the Riddikulus charm. Neville replaced Scary Snape with a vision of Snape looking ridiculous in his grandmother's clothing, Weasley took the legs off the spider, and Hermione re-visualized the boggart as Professor McGonagall giving her an award.

Harry Potter himself had a special problem: for him, the boggart assumed the appearance of a terrifying, soul-sucking dementor. Lupin therefore decided Harry should use it to practice not Riddikulus, but the more difficult Patronus charm, so that he could use that charm when attacked by actual dementors.

Two Spells to Vanquish Your Perfectionism

You, too, can use Riddikulus and Patronus! Every time you feel yourself becoming critical or despondent about your work, try this two-pronged approach:

1) **Use Your Riddikulus Charm.** Say to yourself, “Wait a minute! I’m not really falling short; it’s just the boggart perfectionism making me think so!” This should help defuse the perfectionism.

Then, to finish the job:

2) **Invoke Your Patronus,** a.k.a., Compassionate Objectivity, as defined in *The 7 Secrets of the Prolific*:

“Compassionate objectivity is a mind-set where you combine: (a) Compassion, meaning you view yourself and your work with abundant empathy and understanding, with (b) Objectivity, meaning you see things accurately, with all their nuance and complexity.” In place of perfectionism’s reductive, rigid and punishing world view, compassionate objectivity offers nuance, flexibility, empathy, compassion, and true love and respect. **The compassionately objective person sees through perfectionism’s illusions and understands the realities about herself and her work.** She knows to: set achievable goals, and be compassionate about any failures or mistakes; be realistic and grounded, as opposed to grandiose; emphasize process almost entirely over product; rely on internal rewards; work within the realities of creativity and career building;



Harry Potter's Patronus

and not to identify with her work.

“She also eschews invidious comparisons, dichotomization, rigidity, unhelpful labels, hyperbole, negativity, shortsightedness, fetishes, unconsciousness and blind spots.”

Just like Harry had to practice his Patronus, you’ll need to practice compassionate objectivity. Eventually, however, you’ll be able to maintain a compassionately objective mindset and to use compassionate objectivity to drive off any perfectionist boggarts and dementors you encounter.

Images and lots of information from [The Harry Potter Wiki](#)

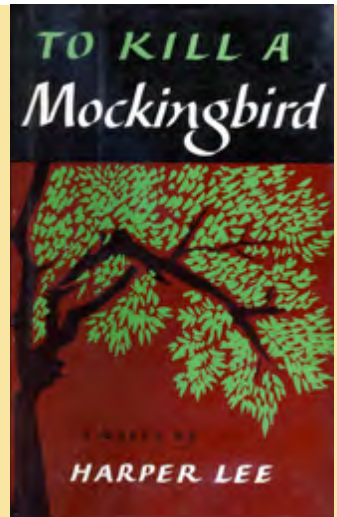
Harper Lee, “Second Novel Syndrome,” and Situational Perfectionism



Harper Lee, author of the immortal *To Kill a Mockingbird*, died last week at 89. She never published another book except for *Go Set a Watchman*, which was published in 2015 in what many consider to be dubious circumstances.

Lee may have suffered from second-novel syndrome, a form of procrastination in which an author becomes self-conscious due to the public attention she receives for her first book, and is consequently inhibited from publishing her second. I don't know whether she wanted to keep publishing or not, but she did tell one interviewer:

“I was hoping for a quick and merciful death [of *Mockingbird*] at the hands of reviewers, but at the same time I sort of hoped that maybe someone would like it enough to give me encouragement. Public encouragement....I hoped for a little, as I said, but I got rather a whole lot, and in some ways this was just about as frightening as the quick, merciful death I’d expected.”



If she did suffer from second-novel syndrome, she wasn't alone. Ralph Ellison (*Invisible Man*) and J.D. Salinger (*The Catcher in the Rye*) also struggled with their celebrity after their initial publication successes, and never completed second novels.

Even the prolific J.K. Rowling struggled after the success of the first Harry Potter book: “For the first time ever in my life, I got writer’s block,” she once commented. “The stakes seemed to have gone up a lot, and I attracted a lot of publicity in Britain for which I was utterly unprepared.”

“Second novel syndrome” is an example of what I call “situational perfectionism.” Here’s an excerpt from a short piece I wrote on that:

Situational perfectionism is when something happens that causes your perfectionism to spike. Examples include:

- You've invested in your writing or other dream – say, by taking a class or buying a piece of equipment – and think, “Now, I'd better make that pay off.”
- You've just finished a workshop or class, and are feeling all, “Now, I'd better do something fabulous.”
- You've committed to your dream by taking time off from your job, moving to part-time work, or hiring a babysitter, and are thinking, “Now I'd better make the most of this precious time.”
- You've had a professional success, and are telling yourself, “Now I'd better do even better. Everyone's watching me.” (Second-Novel Syndrome is thus an example of situational perfectionism.) And,
- You've had an early success, and are now feeling extra pressure to perform. (Same “everyone is watching” imperative, plus you've probably never even had the practice at coping with failure that the rest of us stragglers have had!)

Note all those “now's”: perfectionism is usually short-sighted, whereas compassionate objectivity always takes the long or broad view. Wisdom can be summarized as perspective and proportion.

All this is just to remind you that you have to approach each project utterly prepared to fail. I can understand why this would be harder after a very visible success, but it's doable if you categorically reject perfectionism.

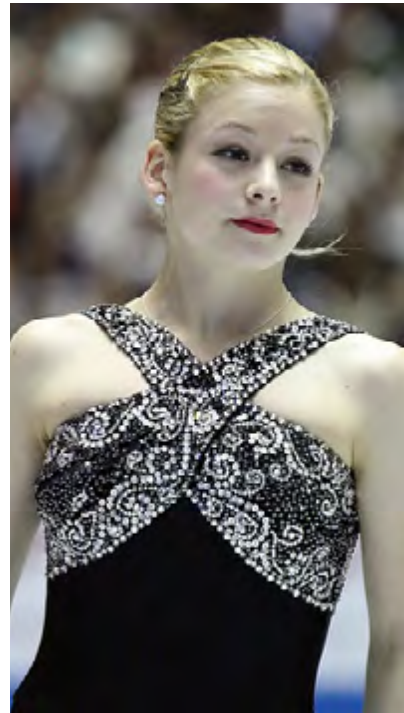
I always feel sad when people can't enjoy their successes. However, I hope it was some solace for Lee, through all those decades, to know that *To Kill a Mockingbird* occupied a unique place in world literature, and that it helped change lives and societies for the better.

Related: Humorist Dave Barry on a surefire method for avoiding Post-Pulitzer Prize situational perfectionism.

The Difference Between High Standards and Perfectionism

Where does “high standards” end and perfectionism begin? When it starts to cost you. A recent New York Times piece by Karen Crouse recounts the trials of figure skater Gracie Gold, an Olympic contender who suffered mental illness, including eating disorders, in large part from the pressures of competing.

Gold’s perfectionism, according to the article, started early. “Throughout [her] childhood, she was fixated on being



first, and flawless. In the classroom, she would furiously, and tearfully, erase an entire sentence if she misspelled a single word. By second grade, she had found an outlet for her compulsiveness, taking formal skating lessons at a rink near the family home in Springfield, MO.”

The absolute hardest thing I have to teach people is that perfectionism **never** helps and **always** hurts. The lesson can be hard to take in because:

1. Perfectionism—whether in the form of harshness, punishments, and/or deprivation—has a superficial logic. “Just work harder, Sally!” Or, “No breaks till you’re finished!”
2. Perfectionism often works in the short term. (But inevitably makes it harder to do your work later on because it creates more fear and disempowerment.)
3. The media loves oversimplified, dramatic perfectionist narratives; and perfectionism is also prominent in advertising. (“Just do it.” “No pain no gain.” Etc.) And finally,
4. Perfectionism is the toxic overapplication of a positive behavior—having high standards—but there’s no clear and absolute line between them. In fact, the line varies from person to person, and even for the same person at different times or for different projects.

Given all this, it's no surprise that many parents, teachers, coaches, etc., buy into perfectionism. And some fields encourage it, including, of course, competitive sports. Crouse's article quotes sports psychologist Caroline Silby about athletic perfectionism: "Some of it is developed through habits and practices that feed the athletic quest for excellence but drive these individuals further away from being healthy, productive non-athletes."

Unfortunately perfectionism distorts our thinking at a very basic level, which prevents us from even recognizing that there's a problem. And even when we do, it limits our options for solving it. "Until Gold's life began to unravel, she couldn't comprehend mental illness. 'I'd hear someone say, 'I'm so depressed,' and I'd think, 'Tough it out,' she said."

And make no mistake: perfectionism can kill. At her low point, Gold says she was, "suicidal for months." (See, also, the stories of students who commit suicide from academic pressure, and the current spike in teen anxiety and depression.)

Perfectionism, which promises a glamorous, idealized version of yourself—effortlessly hyper-productive, and with little need for support or self-care—can be powerfully seductive. Compared to it, productivity work—which mostly involves getting real about yourself, your needs, and your

constraints—can seem like a let-down. But perfectionism is always a lie, and often a dangerous one.

It's the coming to terms with your true self that leaves you **truly** free to produce the best work you can, while also being the best, and healthiest, “you” you can be.

Photo: Gracie Gold by David W. Carmichael. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.



PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism in the “Tiger Mom” and “The King’s Speech”

You’ve probably heard about Amy Chua, the so-called Tiger Mom. A few weeks ago she had a firestorm of publicity around her book, *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, in which she boasts of her authoritarian and coercive parenting methods, which include not only insisting that her daughters follow a narrow course of “success-oriented” classes and activities, but punishing them harshly – via withholding, threats and insults – when they don’t toe the line or achieve top-level success. (For instance, she deprives them of bathroom breaks, threatens to burn their toys, and calls them “garbage.”) She got a major boost when *The Wall Street Journal* featured her in an admiring article.

Some people I discussed Chua's parenting advice with said they weren't comfortable judging others' parenting methods, but in this case I am. Maybe one out of ten, or a hundred, kids will thrive under her authoritarian approach, but the rest will struggle. (Or worse – she also advocates mocking overweight girls to shame them into losing weight, which can lead to a life-threatening eating disorder.) They may struggle while under the Tiger Mom's thumb, or they may struggle later – many of my blocked clients grew up in authoritarian households. But they will struggle.

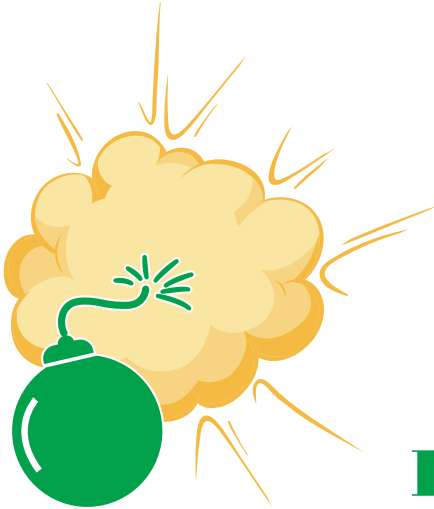
Chua is no naif – she's a Yale law professor who is working with a top publisher and speaker's bureau. She and her business partners are guilty of cynically peddling extreme views that any child development expert could have told them would harm many kids and parents. After a flood of criticism, she tried to walk back her message in a [New York Times article](#) in which she explained that her household really isn't abusive, in part because "I think I pulled back at the right time," and in part because her husband provides a compassionate counterbalance to her authoritarian approach. (So, add hypocrisy to the cynicism.) And with no apparent irony or self-awareness, she also complained about being misunderstood – because authoritarians always crave the understanding and tolerance they would deny others.

Perfectionism also features in **The King's Speech**, the tremendous movie about King George VI's heroic struggle with his stuttering problem. The scene where the soon-to-be King finally breaks down and tells his speech therapist about the childhood abuse that led to his stuttering – coercive and painful “correction” to left-handedness, coercive and painful (with metal braces) correction to knock-knees, and parental neglect and abuse – was heartbreaking. The Website of [The Stuttering Foundation](#) says four main factors cause stuttering: genetics, developmental issues, neurophysiology, and “family dynamics,” noting under that last category that: “high expectations and fast-paced lifestyles can contribute to stuttering.”

Perfectionism = bullying = coercion, and they all lead, with rare exception, to underproductivity. It is, in fact, the best part of us – the liberated part, and the part that values compassion and justice – that resists coercion most. Kids have few options for resisting other than to rebel or withdraw, tactics that, when carried into adulthood and used against an internalized Tiger Mom (or Tiger Dad!), usually lead to procrastination and underproductivity. The key to increasing productivity is to therefore use journaling and other techniques to eliminate all vestiges of your internal Tiger Mom, and replace coercion with compassion. Abundant detail on

those techniques at www.hillaryrettig.com – and, believe me, the process is both probably easier than you think and totally worth it.

PERFECTIONISM



This is Called “Situational Perfectionism”

Situational perfectionism is when something happens that causes your perfectionism to spike. Examples include:

- You’ve invested in your writing or other dream – say, by taking a class or buying a piece of equipment – and think, “Now, I’d better make that pay off.”
- You’ve just finished a workshop or class, and are feeling all, “Now, I’d better do something fabulous.”
- You’ve committed to your dream by taking time off from your job, moving to part-time work, or hiring a babysitter, and are thinking, “Now I’d better make the most of this precious time.”

- You've had a professional success, and are telling yourself, "Now I'd better do even better. Everyone's watching me." (Second-Novel Syndrome is thus an example of situational perfectionism.) And,
- You've had an early success, and are now feeling extra pressure to perform. (Same "everyone is watching" imperative, plus you've probably never even had the practice at coping with failure that the rest of us stragglers have had!)

Note all those "now's": perfectionism is usually short-sighted, whereas compassionate objectivity always takes the long or broad view. Wisdom can be summarized as perspective and proportion.

Here's another example of situational perfectionism:



It was April of 2009 when everything changed. I had been on twitter almost two years at that point, as @abigvictory, using it mainly as a platform for crude jokes and observations about sports....

What happened after I went from 1,000 to 28,000 followers in a week to the magic one million followers just a few months later?

What ensued was this: A little freaking out, a lot of

stage fright and performance anxiety. I felt the need to tweet often even though I had just weaned myself from about 100 tweets a day to 15. Then I worried what I should tweet about. Do I just continue tweeting toilet humor? Do I just tweet a couple of pithy remarks during the day and leave it at that? Do I have to watch what I say? I'd never before in my life had been popular. I was that kid, the one picked last for sports teams, the one at the far end of the lunch table picking at her sandwich while she sat alone. Here I was with a million people listening to me, waiting to see what I would say next. I was overwhelmed with this sudden thrust into the internet limelight....

Now I had a million strangers watching every word I tweeted. What should have been a "Wow, this is exciting!" moment for me became a moment of sudden terror instead. I felt like I suddenly moved into a glass house and all my neighbors were armed with rocks.

The author, Michele Catalano, reports that she went through a period of being "riddled with self-doubt" before finally deciding to return to her pre-fame Twitter roots:

So I went back to twitter with a renewed sense of how I was going to use it. I was going to go back to the way

I was before I was put on that list. After all, wasn't that kind of engagement and banter what got me put on the list in the first place? I would go back to using twitter as a place to hang out with friends and acquaintances. And I would recognize that while I had 920,000 followers, about 800,000 of them were bots, marketers and SEO specialists who followed ten thousand people and would never read a word I tweeted.

The pressure was off and the fun was back on.”

PERFECTIONISM



Let's Talk About “Situational Perfectionism”

“Situational perfectionism” is when something causes your perfectionism to spike above its usual levels. (Which usually, in turn, causes your procrastination to spike!)

It's a common phenomenon, with many causes. Here are a few:

A prior failure. Often, when we perceived we've failed, we get more afraid of future failures. (The solution is to not make such a fuss over failure.) But, paradoxically...

A prior success can also do it! That's because you feel (often rightly) more scrutinized. Second Novel Syndrome is a classic example of this type of situational perfectionism, and even J.K. Rowling experienced it after the success of the first Harry Potter book:

“For the first time ever in my life, I got writer’s block... The stakes seemed to have gone up a lot, and I attracted a lot of publicity in Britain for which I was utterly unprepared.” Fortunately, she got over it, but many writers and others, alas, never do.



Labels can be a problem! Labeling your project “urgent,” “important,” or “difficult” can obviously stoke your perfectionist fears. But even labeling it “easy” can cause problems by causing you to be blindsided by—and overreact to—the work’s ordinary challenges. Also, **many projects that seem easy really aren’t**. These include:

- Seemingly simple projects that open up and get more complicated as you work on them.
- Those with a tricky emotional or political component. Many people, for instance, expect memoir writing to be easy because “you’re just writing about what happened to you.” But writing about difficult personal

events, or writing something that may upset family or friends, is far from easy.

- Also, perfectionists' mistrust of simplicity and "too easy / undeserved" success can cause them to over-complicate their projects.

Other things that trigger situational perfectionism include:

- Working in the face of pressure from coworkers, parents, partners, or others.
- Comparing your life, process, or outcomes to someone else's. (Regardless of the facts, a perfectionist will inevitably come out on the losing end of her comparisons.)
- Tying your project's success to some important outcome, like a big paycheck or promotion, or an increase in status or legitimacy. ("Once my novel gets published, then I'll be a **real** writer.")
- Feeling the need to recoup/justify an investment. E.g.: "I just bought that new computer [or attended that expensive workshop] NOW I'D BETTER MAKE IT COUNT!" And,
- Expecting to "make up for lost time" after a vacation or other break.

Like all perfectionism, situational perfectionism is solvable.
**Step #1 is recognizing that perfectionism never helps,
and is always a dead end.**

PERFECTIONISM

When a Success Leaves You *Less* Able to Do Your Work

I use the term “situational perfectionism” to describe circumstances that cause your perfectionism to spike. A failure (or perceived failure) can do that, but so, paradoxically, can a success, especially if it causes you to feel more visible or scrutinized. J.K. Rowling experienced this after the exceptional success of the first Harry Potter book, but fortunately was able to move past it.

Other writers aren't so lucky. From this week's obituary of writer Bette Howland:



“In 1984 Ms. Howland received a MacArthur Foundation award — the so-called genius grant. But her literary output dried up. Jacob Howland sees the two things as related.” “I think the award may have sapped her confidence,” he told the website Literary Hub in 2015. “If people don’t expect great things from you, it’s easier to please them. But people expect great things from a writer who has won the MacArthur.””



It’s always best to approach projects with a “clean mental slate,” as free as possible from past history and future expectations. And, regardless of your perceived visibility or others’ expectations, you must always be prepared to fail.

And you should keep others, and especially potentially critical others, out of your head.

Stay Zen! Meaning: stay in the moment, focused on doing the work. And trust the process by which quantity creates quality.

By the way, many people return from holidays determined to “make up for lost time” or “do way better than before.” This is also situational perfectionism, so don’t do it!

Dave Barry on How to Cope With Post-Pulitzer Prize Situational Perfectionism

Situational perfectionism is when something causes your perfectionism to spike. It can be a failure, of course, but it can also be a success. Here's J.K. Rowling, quoted in [Salon](#):

"For the first time ever in my life, I got writer's block. The stakes seemed to have gone up a lot, and I attracted a lot of publicity in Britain for which I was utterly unprepared."

Turns out humorist Dave Barry got into a similar fix after winning the Pulitzer Prize:

"I had this feeling like, You know, jeez, does this mean that I'm still allowed to write stupid columns? Because

my column won in the distinguished commentary category. No one had ever called my writing “distinguished.” So I wrestled with my first columns after winning.” (From *And Here’s the Kicker: Conversations with 21 Top Humor Writers on Their Craft*, by Mike Sacks.)

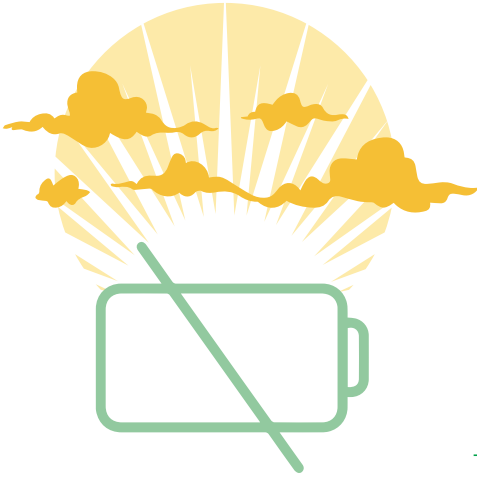
(Also an example of how labels and arbitrary categorizations can screw you up. Save them for your marketing—and even then, don’t take them too seriously. Just take your writing at face value.)

You’ll be happy to know that Barry’s first post-Pulitzer column was about how his dog kept eating lizards and throwing them up.

Nothing like tackling perfectionism head-on.



PERFECTIONISM



Beware Post-Summer Situational Perfectionism!

A few people have told me they've been having trouble getting back to work after summer vacation.

They're telling themselves (and others, unfortunately, are also telling them) stuff like: "Okay, summer's over. I've had my break. Now, I'd better get back to work. In fact, I need to work extra hard to make up for lost time."

That's an example of situational perfectionism, which is any condition that causes your perfectionism to spike. And, like all perfectionism, it's a dead end. Putting pressure on yourself only causes your creative, productive self to rebel and shut down.

Also, let's not forget that many vacations are not actually that relaxing. One person I spoke with did a "service vacation" where she nobly but stressfully helped out a charitable cause. Another had to unexpectedly renovate an apartment that a tenant trashed. Still another spent part of her vacation in close quarters with difficult relatives.

***They all needed a vacation
from their vacation!***



I myself had a terrific summer with none of the stresses mentioned above. We took a couple of trips, including one to Japan. But even a great vacation can be wearying. So it took me a while to recover and recover my productivity, too. (I knew not to push it.)

So, lessons:

1. Don't try to make up time after a break. (Kind of defeats the whole purpose!)
2. Don't put pressure on yourself, or let others put pressure you. The minute you put even a bit of pressure on yourself you're being perfectionist.
3. "Re-entries" are tough. Be patient with yourself while working to regain your normal work capacity.

4. Perfectionism is always a dead end.
5. The most reliable way to increase productivity—and, for many people, the only way—is to get more nonperfectionist.

So many great lessons from such seemingly small incidents! Productivity work is always like that: rich with depth and meaning.

As always, look forward to your thoughts...

Nonperfectionism in a Single Sentence

Nothing is as humbling, to a writer, anyway, as when you've used a lot of words to say something, and then someone comes along and nails it in a single sentence.

But also nothing is more of a gift, so I guess it evens out.

It happened to me with my book *The Lifelong Activist*. Somewhere in the midst of writing a 400+ page tome on how to live a sustainable, balanced life that includes a serious political mission, I found this quote by the French writer Gustave Flaubert that pretty much summed everything up:

“Live your life regular and orderly like a bourgeois, so that you may be violent and original in your work.”



(Of course, Flaubert doesn't tell you *how* to do that great thing, so I guess my book is still useful!)

These days I spend a lot of time helping people overcome perfectionism. And for my work-in-progress, *Joyful Productivity for Undergraduates* (due out this year!), I'm happy to say I've come up with no fewer than nine great solutions, which I'll share in a future newsletter. But I recently saw this great quote by spiritual teacher Ram Dass that's as succinct a description of antiperfectionism work as you'll find:

“ It is important to expect nothing, to take every experience, including the negative ones, as merely steps on the path, and to proceed.”

I'll just add that it's especially important to follow this advice at moments when you're most tempted to stray from it—e.g., when you feel you've failed.



Perfectionism never helps, only make things worse. Give it up as the bad habit it is, and you open yourself up to ever more joy and abundance in your work and life.

PERFECTIONISM



Procrastination, Perfectionism and Addiction

“ This is all a giant procrastination and you must deal with it. You must.” – Words spoken to author and then-active alcoholic Caroline Knapp by her dying father, also an alcoholic (from Knapp’s book, *Drinking: a Love Story*)

The link between perfectionism and addiction has been well documented, but I’ve come to believe that perfectionism plays an even bigger and more central role in many addictions than is generally thought – and that perfectionism itself can be addictive. Let me offer some examples of how perfectionism is handled in addiction literature, and then an idea of how I think it should be handled:

In **Holy Hunger**, her memoir of food addiction and healing, Margaret Bullitt-Jonas describes how she, “was a perfectionist bent on getting every detail ‘right,’ ready to pounce with condemnation on anyone – myself included – who got it ‘wrong.’”

In her alcoholism and recovery memoir **Drinking: A Love Story**, the late Caroline Knapp writes,

“An outsider walking past my cubicle that morning would have seen a petite woman of thirty-four with long, light brown hair pulled back in a barrette, neat and orderly-looking. Closer inspection would have suggested a perfectionistic, polished exterior, a careful attention to detail: a young woman with well-manicured nails and black leggings and Italian shoes; a daily list of things to do sitting on the desk, written in perfect print, several items already neatly ticked off; a workspace so compulsively tidy that one of my staff writers used to say you could fly a plane over my desk and it would look like a map of the Midwest, everything at perfect right angles. Colleagues saw me as smart and introspective...a paragon of efficiency at work: organized, professional, productive.”

In another book, she writes, “I am a person who loathes imperfection.”

In **The Heart of Addiction**, Lance Dodes, M.D., includes a chapter “Addictive Behavior as a Rebellion Against a Punitive Conscience,” and writes, “Severe, unrealistic self-criticism is a very common precipitant of addictive behavior.” Of one of his patients, he writes, “His use of a drug to deal with the self-condemnation of such a punitive conscience has been described as a way to create an identity free of the ‘tyranny’ of this eternal hanging judge.”

And in Alan Berger’s **12 Stupid Things That Mess Up Recovery**, “Stupid Thing 7” is “using the program [Alcoholics Anonymous] to try to become Perfect.” That chapter begins, “Believe it or not, perfectionism underlies most of our problems.”

The interesting thing about the above examples is that they all somewhat miss the mark. Bullitt-Jonas mentions perfectionism almost in passing, even though it was a major part of her psyche and almost certainly a major cause of her long-stalled graduate thesis, among other problems. Knapp, ordinarily the most precise of observers and self-analysts, seems uncharacteristically muddled when she juxtaposes her perfectionism – and, later, compulsiveness – with beneficent qualities such as polish and efficiency in arguably self-congratulatory ways.

Although Dodes describes perfectionism brilliantly – I’m so

jealous of his phrases “punitive conscience” and “eternal hanging judge!” – he doesn’t actually name it, or devote much space to it. And I wonder why Berger, who believes perfectionism underlies most of our problems, relegates it to #7 of a list of 12. Why not a whole book on perfectionism, or at least a #1 or #2 ranking?

Early in his classic book **Addictive Thinking**, Abraham J. Twerski, M.D., provides an example of an addictive-type “distortion of thinking” he claims is not addictive:

“One young woman was procrastinating turning in her term paper for a class.

“Why don’t you finish it?” I asked.

“It’s finished already,” she said.

“Then why haven’t you submitted it” I asked.

Because I need to do some more work on it,” she said.

“But I thought you said it’s finished,” I remarked.

“It is,” she said.



Why does he consider her behavior not addictive? Sure, she’s not using alcohol or drugs, but she’s engaging in a self-destructive coping habit that is self-reinforcing. (“Coping habit” because she’s probably delaying out of fear and/or anxiety; “self-reinforcing” because the more she delays,

the more fear she will probably feel around the project, and the greater her need will be to cope.)

Perfectionism's Stinkin' Thinkin'

Perfectionism supports addiction in at least two ways:

First, it causes persistent feelings of frustration, despair, shame and guilt that an addict might turn to alcohol or some other addictive substance or behavior to soothe.

Second, it distorts your view of reality in ways that promote addiction and interfere with recovery. Distorted perspective and thinking are fundamental to addiction, which is often referred to as a “disease of denial.” (In A.A., they call the dysfunctional thinking “stinkin’ thinkin’.”) Let’s see how perfectionism supports addiction by comparing a typical perfectionist scenario with a typical addictive one.

In the perfectionist scenario, a writer expects her first drafts to be polished and well organized – in other words, like other people’s final drafts. When she fails at that unreasonable goal, she reacts with great harshness, calling herself a “loser” and other names. And then, losing confidence and perspective, she abandons her writing project.

In the addictive scenario, a compulsive eater expects to reduce her calorie intake to 800 a day and lose five pounds in a week. When she fails at those unreasonable goals, she reacts with great harshness, calling herself a “loser” and other names. And then, losing confidence and perspective, she abandons her weight-loss plan.

Both scenarios illustrate key aspects of perfectionism:

- Setting unreasonable goals, and then punishing yourself harshly for failing to meet them. Not only is this an inhumane trap, but it is a scenario designed (and I mean that literally) to increase your fear around the goal so that you stop trying to pursue it. The purpose of procrastination is to protect us from the failure, success, or change we are terrified of, and it fulfills that purpose when we lose all hope and stop trying.
- Seeing things in rigid absolutes, in this case as total success or total failure. Twerski says, “Addictive thinking is often also characterized by a rigidity of thought, what we may call ‘the either/or rule.’” The writer’s draft might have had some good points to it; the dieter might have lost a pound or eaten less junk food than usual. Those partial accomplishments are not only worth acknowledging, but essential to acknowledge, since refusing to do so not only feeds de-

spair, but makes the goal seem much harder to achieve than it actually is.

- A focus on product (the writing, the weight loss), not process. Even Flaubert, obsessed as he was with “*le mot juste*” said, “Success must be a consequence and never a goal.” Succumbing to the temptation to focus on the result merely feeds your perfectionist inner critic and undermines you,
- Overidentifying with your projects, so that your self-esteem rides on their success. Note how the writer and dieter didn’t conclude that their writing and dieting were, in this instance, sub-par, but that they themselves were losers. Overidentifying with one’s work is dangerous because most projects succeed or fail at least partly due to circumstances beyond your control – and to make your self-esteem so heavily dependent on things you can’t control is a huge risk. The fact that your goals were probably unreasonable to start with only intensifies that risk. Also, the “emotional roller coaster” of extreme highs and lows is, in itself, addictive. Sobriety often feels weird and boring in comparison, at least initially; and if you’re hooked on the highs, that alone could lead you back to the addictive behavior.

- Mistrust of success when it happens. If a perfectionist happens to actually achieve a goal, she doesn't think, "Oh, that's great!" She disparages the victory, concluding that she set the bar too low. Talk about a lose-lose scenario!
- Grandiosity. Although perfectionism and addiction are generally indicators of low self-esteem, they also often, paradoxically, involve a strong element of grandiosity. Perfectionists think they should be able to outperform the ordinary run of mortals. So, the writer believes she should be able to spin out polished drafts effortlessly, and the dieter believes she should be able to lose weight effortlessly. The reality is that both writing and weight loss are complex and challenging endeavors, and that most people who succeed at either typically work much harder than is generally recognized.
- Magical Thinking. The grandiosity is a species of magical thinking (letting your needs and desires dictate your perceptions and analyses). Here are some others:

Thinking you can make huge life changes all at once – say, in a New Year's resolution – instead of via incremental progress.

Thinking you can chide and bully yourself into more pro-

ductivity, or less eating, when you've tried that strategy for decades and it hasn't worked.

Thinking that your perfectionism is a productive behavior – “I just like to set high standards, that's all.” – when you have abundant evidence to the contrary.

Thinking you can achieve a complex or difficult goal all by yourself, when in reality you probably need to work with mentors and a robust supportive community.

Reason for Optimism

I've chosen to talk mainly about compulsive eating partly because it's an issue I struggle with personally, and partly because eating and writing are both essential activities with rich emotional contexts that can get “twisted” via addictive or perfectionist thinking. And neither eaters nor writers can go cold-turkey abstinent the way alcoholics or smokers can.

If perfectionism and addiction are so closely linked, it only makes sense that overcoming your perfectionism will aid your recovery from an addiction. (And that addiction books will aid you in your quest to overcome perfectionism, which is why I recommend you read all the books mentioned in this essay) If you're struggling with an addiction, then you

definitely need professional help and should probably also join a Twelve Step group.

If you feel helpless or hopeless about your perfectionism or addiction, that's probably your inner perfectionist talking: your now-or-never, all-or-nothing, just-do-it, what-are-you-waiting-for, don't-bother-me-with-your-trivial-concerns perfectionist. She or he means well, but is rooted in fear and prey to magical thinking. Both perfectionism and addiction can be alleviated and so, instead of hopelessness, you should feel optimism.

When you start seriously working on your problem, your fearful inner perfectionist might fight back with lulling messages designed to promote ambivalence: "this isn't so bad," "I can live with this," and "you're not as bad off as [fill in the name of someone even more mired]," Don't believe them. As Caroline Knapp's father said, perfectionism and addiction are a "giant procrastination."

The future can be much happier than the past, and you probably have far more capacity for growth and change – even rapid growth and change – than you realize. At 51, I'm happier than I've ever been, and I didn't even get started on this work until I was 45. Whether you're 21, 31, 41, 61 or older, change is possible and you can be happier, too.





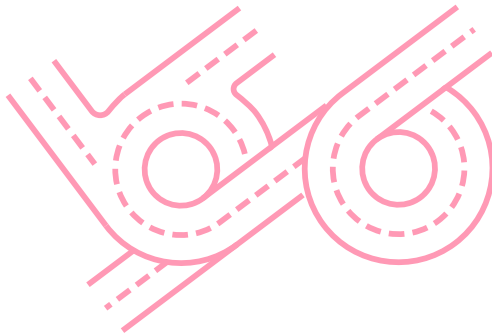
3



THE

“MIDDLES”

SERIES



THE "MIDDLES" SERIES

What To Do If You Are Stuck in the Middle of a Project

Middles are tough.

It's no accident that Dante began *The Inferno*, his allegorical journey through Hell, thusly:

Midway upon the journey of our life

I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had
been lost.



Or that Christian, the pilgrim in John Bunyan's allegory *The*

Pilgrim's Progress, encounters the bog called the "Slough of Despond" midway along his journey.

At Grub Street Writers, where I teach, many writers refer to the "Murky Middles" of writing projects.

Dark forests, bogs, murk: you might get the idea that a lot of people find middles not just difficult, but confusing and downright scary.

Here's the problem with middles:

- The piece (or project) is no longer fresh and new and shiny. Your early energy and enthusiasm are waning.
- At the same time, the piece is at maximum entropy: meaning, what you've done up till now is super chaotic and disorganized.
- You've also become more aware of the piece's problems. It's not living up to the pristine, Platonic vision that initially inspired you!
- Moreover, you're not even sure how to solve the problems, or whether you'll even be able to solve them.
- And the end is nowhere in sight.

The middle, in other words, is where the work gets tougher at the very same moment that your enthusiasm weakens.

No wonder you're discouraged!

It's also easy to see how the whole thing could snowball into an avalanche of disappointment and discouragement! (Forests, bogs, avalanches—it's all getting worse and worse!) This is particularly likely if you perfectionistically constantly judge your output: e.g., "This word sucks. That sentence is so inelegant. This project is badly organized. I've mismanaged the whole thing. It's doomed to failure. No one's interested, etc.")

Here are some tips for getting through:

1) If you're struggling in the midst of a project, **recognize that you might not, in fact, be doing anything wrong.** It's just the Murky Middle!

2) **Maintain your perspective**—this won't last forever, and like Dante, Christian, and many other intrepid voyagers, you, too, will eventually reach paradise. (Or, at least the end of the work!)



3) **Be extra vigilant about perfectionism,** and extra dili-

gent about using your tools, including self-compassion and timed writing intervals.

Of course, this entire discussion applies far beyond writing. Dante and Bunyan were writing about one's spiritual development, and relationships also can have Murky Middles. (I was warned about it in foster parent training.) The Murky Middle also happens during hikes and quilting projects and probably all of life's important or challenging endeavors.

Good luck using these techniques. As always, I welcome your questions and feedback. In the next two posts, I'll discuss some other reasons middles are tough, including the dreaded Middle-of-the-Middle! Have fun till then!

Why the Middles of Projects are Tough (Part 2): Plus, How to Have Fun Revising!

Middles are Tough

Last time I wrote about how the middles of writing and other projects can be difficult, citing Dante’s *Inferno*, which begins “midway upon the journey of our life,” and John Bunyan’s classic *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, in which the protagonist, Christian, literally bogs down midway, in the infamous “Slough of Despond.”

Middles are where your enthusiasm ebbs often at the exact moment when the project itself seems most chaotic, disorganized, and daunting. They're a double whammy, in other words.

But that's not all...

Middles are massive

Anne Lamott famously said, in *Bird by Bird*, that every piece of writing begins with a “shitty first draft,” but it's probably more like ten, twenty, or thirty shitty drafts. Make sure you understand what a “draft” is, though:

- It's a single, quick run-through of your piece (or chapter or other section), during which you correct its obvious and easy problems, and partially correct its hard ones.
- You move quickly and lightly through the piece, making incremental improvements and resisting the temptation to drill down or bog down on any one problem.

Then, when you get to the end, you repeat the process over and over again; always moving fast and keeping a light touch. Through these repetitions, you gradually gain insight into your piece's true meaning and form, and solve nearly all its

problems, including the tough ones. (Always ask a colleague or mentor for help with the hard ones—don't get stuck.) Many drafts = a “massive middle.” But don't despair! You actually want a massive middle because...



Remember to always revise by “running” joyfully through your projects. Tough, boggy parts merit a quick inspection and a bit of poking, but then run on, knowing you'll return to them later.

Quality Happens “Automagically” in the Middle

Continue the above process and, at some point, the piece will “magically” (that's really how it feels!) attain “non-shit-tiness,” meaning it will have become well-organized and coherent. At that point, the writing process becomes mostly easy and fun copy-editing and other polishing.

So, let's assume that the first 15% of most pieces is the inspired part, and the last 15% is easy copy-editing. That leaves a giant middle of 70% where you're thrashing around in the thickets.

Only, be sure not to thrash! Maintaining a light, fast touch is the best way to ensure that you not only get the piece or project done, but have fun doing it.

Why the Middles of Projects are Tough (Part 3): Middles Have Middles!

I previously wrote about how the middles of projects are tough:

- They're the place where the work seems to get much tougher right at the same moment that your enthusiasm starts to ebb.
- They're a much bigger part of the project than most people realize. (Around 80%!)

However, there's another problem with middles: they have middles!

Yes, you can have a middle-of-a-middle. Here's how it works:

Many endeavors begin with a “honeymoon period” where the work is fresh and new, the possibilities seem endless, and you’re filled with energy and enthusiasm. That’s the beginning of the project.

Alas, like all honeymoons, it too soon comes to an end. Reality sets in, and inevitably disappoints. The work doesn’t come together as easily as you had at first imagined, and you become aware that what you write may never live up to your pristine early vision.

Your motivation wanes, but you resolve to soldier on.

And then, you hit a point where everything seems particularly bleak. I call that the “anti-honeymoon,” and the most famous fictional example is probably the “Slough of Despond” (or,



Please meet Lucy, a paralyzed dog in a wheelchair who summited Mount Washington – an 8 mile trip! – and Lucy’s guardian Courtney Dunning. Like all dogs, Lucy doesn’t get daunted by middles: she knows to take things one step at a time and celebrate her achievements. [Here’s a video documenting Lucy’s achievement.](#) And here’s her story.

in modern parlance, “Swamp of Despair”) from John Bunyan’s **The Pilgrim’s Progress**:

‘This miry Slough is such a place as cannot be mended; it is the descent whither the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run, and therefore is it called the Slough of Despond: for still as the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, there ariseth in his soul many fears, and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions, which all of them get together, and settle in this place; and this is the reason of the badness of this ground.

For many projects, the anti-honeymoon occurs about 25% of the way through.

The Slough = Perfectionism

In *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the Slough consists mainly of the pilgrim Christian’s “fears, and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions.” In other words, it has less to do with his actual predicament, and more to do with his perceptions of, and reactions to, that predicament. (See also: perfectionism.)

The important thing to remember about the anti-honeymoon is that it’s temporary: just keep working and eventually things will improve:

You'll return to the "normal middle" of the piece where things aren't so bad, and then eventually make it to what Christian would have called your "Celestial City," where:

- [(a) The end of the work will be in sight, and the work itself will get easier. (You'll be focusing on details instead of making major changes and corrections.)
 - [(b) Although the result probably won't be exactly the same as you initially envisioned, it will probably be fine, and you will be proud to have accomplished it.
-



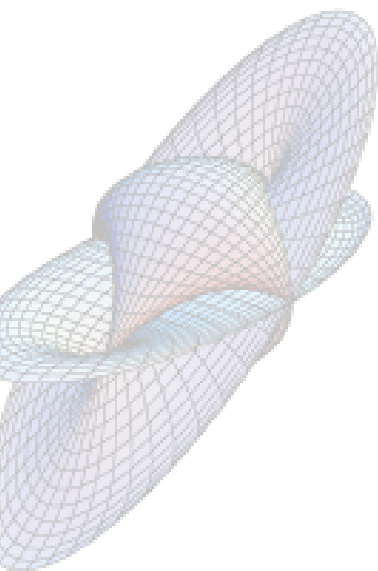


4



FOR STUDENTS
AND
ACADEMICS



FOR STUDENTS
AND ACADEMICS

Lessons from a Struggling Math Student

Math teacher Ben Orlin has all the usual complaints about students.

They don't do their work, don't show up for help, and settle for memorizing facts instead of working to truly understand the material. Unlike many teachers, however, he knows better than to label his students as lazy and unmotivated—in part because he once walked in their shoes.

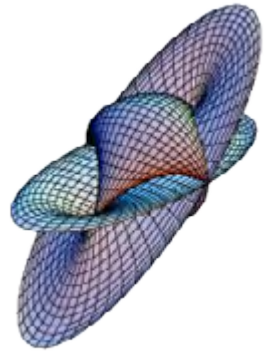
In an essay of compelling honesty and empathy, he writes about how he himself once struggled during a class on topology (the funky science of shapes and spaces), and

took refuge in the very same procrastinating behaviors he sees in students.

His story demonstrates many features of perfectionism, including:

1) How Blindsiding Makes Things Worse

Orlin: “Thanks to a childhood of absurd privilege, I entered college well-prepared. As a sophomore in the weed-out class for Yale math majors, I earned the high score on the final exam. After that, it seemed plausible to me that I’d never fail at anything mathematical.”



When Orlin did start failing, therefore, he was caught off guard—and, in common with many smart young people, had no idea how to deal with it. So, he resorted to the kinds of avoidance behaviors mentioned above.

When we’re blindsided, our defenses are down, so any loss or struggle is extra shocking. Having too-high expectations for success is a classic prelude to blindsiding so it’s important to moderate your expectations even in situations, such as Orlin’s, where it would seem reasonable

to expect a strong success. (Beware statements like: “I’m definitely going to ace this project because...”)

2) How Denial, Anger, and Blame Distract Us From the Real Problem

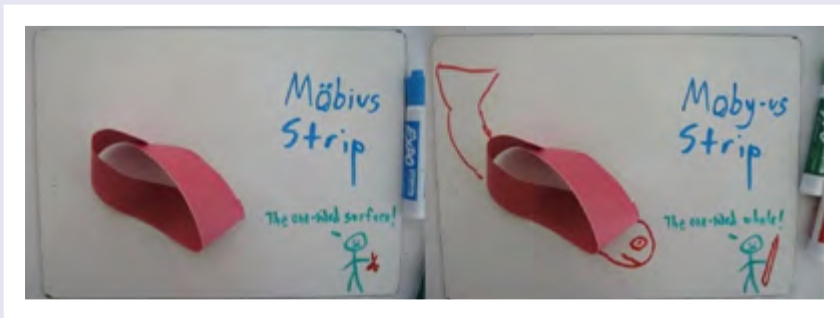
Orlin: “I blamed others for my ordeal. Why had my girlfriend tricked me into taking this nightmare class? (She hadn’t.) Why did the professor just lurk in the back of the classroom, cackling at our incompetence, instead of teaching us? (He wasn’t cackling. Lurking, maybe, but not cackling.) Why did it need to be stupid topology, instead of something fun? (Topology is beautiful, the mathematics of lava lamps and pottery wheels.) And, when other excuses failed, that final line of defense: I hate this class! I hate topology!”

Actually, many of the people I work with overblame themselves—a classic example being a student who blames herself for poor grades caused by bad teaching, personal troubles, or other factors. Or, an employee blaming himself for a failure that was really caused by inept supervision and a chaotic workplace.

Either way, however, the denial, anger, and blame are distractions from what should be your main task in the face of a barrier: problem-solving.

3) How Perfectionism Raises the Stakes on your Project to Self-Defeating Levels

I call that “**The Ahab Syndrome,**” and Orlin helpfully illustrates it with this picture of “Moby-us-Dick:”



(A Möbius strip is a common topological device.)
And, finally,

4) How Shame is the Real Barrier to Growth and Success

Orlin sees himself, asking his professor for help, as, “An un-bathed child asking for soup.” That’s a very ashamed—and, hence, powerfully disempowering—image.

And the shame from these kinds of incidents tends to persist, undermining your confidence. Orlin: “It’s surprisingly hard to write about this, even now. Mathematical failure

– much like romantic failure – leaves us raw and vulnerable.” I myself can still remember my first bad grade—a D in freshman chemistry— and I once spoke with a 76 year old woman who started crying when she recalled the shame of having been held back in **second grade**.

Unfortunately, there appears to be no expiration date on unresolved or unhealed traumatic failures. You need to do the work of resolving and healing them.

Fortunately, Orlin overcame his shame enough to approach his teacher, who helped him.

Orlin: “Teachers have such power. He could have crushed me if he wanted. He didn’t, of course. Once he recognized my infantile state, he spoon-fed me just enough ideas so that I could survive the lecture. I begged him not to ask me any tough questions during the presentation – in effect, asking him not to do his job – and with a sigh he agreed. I made it through the lecture, graduated the next month, and buried the memory as quickly as I could.”

And drew the right conclusions:

Orlin: “Procrastination isn’t just about laziness. It’s about anxiety. To work on something you don’t understand

means facing your doubts and confusions head-on. Procrastination pushes back that painful confrontation....

“I tell my story to illustrate that failure isn’t about a lack of “natural intelligence,” whatever that is. Instead, failure is born from a messy combination of bad circumstances: high anxiety, low motivation, gaps in background knowledge. Most of all, we fail because, when the moment comes to confront our shortcomings and open ourselves up to teachers and peers, we panic and deploy our defenses instead. For the same reason that I pushed away Topology, struggling students push me away now.

“Not understanding Topology doesn’t make me stupid. It makes me bad at Topology. That’s a difference worth remembering, whether you’re a math prodigy, a struggling student, or a teacher holding your students’ sense of self-worth in the palm of your hand. Failing at math ought to be like any failure, frustrating but ultimately instructive. In the end, I’m grateful for the experience.”

Orlin’s prescription for teachers:

“Just as therapists must undergo therapy as part of their training, no math teacher ought to set foot near human students until they’ve felt the sting of mathematical failure.”

My prescription for you:

Notice how little it really took to get Orlin back on track: a single conversation with a helpful teacher.

The moment you catch yourself procrastinating, or whenever you want to boost your productivity, reach out for help or support—from a teacher or other mentor, a savvy peer or colleague, or me.

In fact, prolific people often round up mentors even before they actually need them.

My thanks to Orlin for permission to quote freely from his work, and reproduce the Moby-us image.

FOR STUDENTS
AND ACADEMICS



A Symposium on Oppression in the Academy

Graduate school presents itself as a classic apprenticeship opportunity in which you work long hours over many years for a poverty salary, receiving in exchange instruction, mentorship and an entree to the field. I believe that that contract, as played out in academia, is fundamentally unfair, because a graduate student's teaching and research often yields his university tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars in tuition and research funding, while he only receives a small fraction of that value in compensation. Still, students willingly enter into these contracts, and so the situation might not be so bad if the universities actually lived up to their half of the bargain. The trouble is, they often

don't. Many graduate students are given minimal mentorship, and many are "mentored" destructively – with the student himself being blamed, of course, if he underperforms as a result.

Moreover, the career payoff is, in many cases, illusory. In her 4/18/2010 New York Times article, "The Long-Haul Degree," Patricia Cohen cites a study that found that more than a third of 2008 humanities Ph.D. students remained unemployed a full year after getting their degree.

Of course, academia is happy to continue exploiting those unemployed Ph.D.'s with poorly paid, part-time, no-benefit, no-advancement "adjunct" and "instructor" gigs.

Obviously, not all grad experiences are awful or exploitative, and some are wonderful. But the bad stories I hear are truly awful. Consider the below, said to graduate student by her thesis advisor:

"Graduate school is not about babysitting, and I'm not going to be your mother hen. If you want that, go to a community college."

It is:

1. Gratuitously insulting and demeaning.
2. Snobbish (and ignorant), with the dig at community colleges.
3. Possibly sexist, directed as it was to a female student (by a female advisor, by the way). I doubt the professor would have used the term “mother hen” to a male student, although she might have. And, above all,
4. Controlling and intimidating. “Don’t bother me,” is what this advisor is really saying. “Just do great work, get it published, and let me share in the glory and collect the grants. But if you run into any problems, solve them yourself.”

Of course, the advisor never bothered to delineate which requests for help she considered reasonable and which she didn’t: vagueness is a tool of oppressive systems. Probably, if the advisor had really stopped to think it over, she would see, (a) that the vast majority of her students’ needs are reasonable, and (b) that it’s also her job to cope with stu-

dents who are basically competent but require more support than average. She would also see that her strategy of setting up a straw-person in the form of an over-needy student, and using that straw-person to control her actual students, is not only dishonorable but an abdication of professional responsibility.

I can't entirely blame the professor, however, because her quote reflects the pervasive macho propaganda about how tough graduate school is supposed to be: how it separates the "wheat" from the "chaff," the "serious scholars" from the "dilettantes," etc. Graduate school is "sink or swim," students are told; and anyone asking for more than the bare minimum of help (or any help at all, in some cases) is looking to be "babysat," "handheld," or "coddled." (All of the terms in quotes were actually said to graduate students I know by their advisors – and note the grandiosity, dichotomization, labeling and other perfectionist symptoms.)

Oh, and "let's face it: not everyone can handle intellectual work, and if we open the field up to everyone it will simply devalue it." (The straw person argument again.) Oh – and I almost forgot! – if you've got significant personal responsibilities or problems that you need to balance with your scholastic activities, too bad; and the fact that you're even asking indicates your lack of seriousness.

Of course, it's particularly grating when you hear that kind of macho garbage spewed by advisors in fields related to social justice.

In **Mentors, Muses & Monsters: 30 Writers on the People Who Changed Their Lives** (Elizabeth Benedict, ed.), my Grub Street Writers colleague Christopher Castellani, wrote that his MFA program, "had a sink-or-swim philosophy. You were a writer with innate talent, or you weren't. The program's goal was to anoint the real writers and spare the 'nonreal' ones from years of heartbreak." Fortunately, Castellani subsequently attended the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, where some of the perfectionist damage was healed:

By the end of my stint...I don't feel "real" or "not real," and I begin to understand that such a distinction is meaningless, that the questions should be: Am I working hard? Am I learning? Am I digging deeper, embracing complications? Am I "failing better"?

Do I think the "mother hen" professor is a monster? Of course not: she's probably a decent person who is trying to juggle multiple responsibilities with inadequate support from her own superiors. The "mother hen" comment might have even been an effort to help her student by clarifying the rules for their interaction, which is more than many advisors do. Still, her comment was, at the very

least, inept; and whether or not she meant to manipulate her student into not feeling comfortable asking for help, that was the result she got.

And I've heard worse stories, much worse: like the one from the graduate student whose adviser told her, "Graduate school is about wrestling with your demons, and I hope I don't wind up to be one of them, but if I do, so be it." And (surprise, surprise) the advisor did indeed prove himself to be a demon by stealing his student's work and publishing it himself. His justification was that of oppressors everywhere: that the victim drove him to it (in this case, because she was supposedly too slow to publish). And, not surprisingly, he also committed other egregious sins, including neglect, cruelty and sexism.

This student actually had nightmares in which her advisor raped her. Is it any wonder she had trouble writing?

It's not just advisers who are abusive, by the way. Another awful story I was told was of a graduate student at an Ivy League college (which I'll call College X) who, after learning that her brother was diagnosed with a serious cancer, went to the departmental administrator to do the paperwork for a leave of absence to be with him, and was told, "This is College X, and we don't take leaves."

FOR STUDENTS
AND ACADEMICS

Four More Reasons People Quit the Ph.D.

After reading (and commenting on) Dr. Mewburn's recent fantastic article on [Why People Quit the Ph.D.](#), I wanted to add four more reasons to her list. As a writing productivity teacher and coach, I frequently see these among graduate students who are stuck.

1) Prior Harsh Rejection

While rejection is endemic to work and life, not all rejections are the same. Some are harsh enough that they undermine you in ways that make it difficult to get future work done. If left unhealed, such harsh rejections can easily derail a thesis and career.



Some harsh rejections are obvious, but others may not be. A good rule of thumb is that if you can remember a rejection, and especially if the memory elicits feelings of guilt, shame, or anger, then it was probably harsh. Also, keep in mind that rejection:

(a) Comes in many more forms than most people realize, and includes things like callousness, capriciousness, disparagement, diminishment, bias, marginalization, hypercriticality, hypocriticality (neglect), and ad hominem attack. And,

(b) Can come from many more sources than most people realize, including not just your supervisor and other professional colleagues, but friends and family, or even a news story that disparages your work. And,

Blindsiding is a common amplifier of rejection harshness, because when you're blindsided—for instance, denied a job, publication, or other opportunity that you were absolutely sure you were going to get—your defenses are down. (Moderate your expectations, people!)

And perfectionism, as usual, only makes things worse, since perfectionists not only set unreasonably high standards for success, they tend to overidentify with their work, and so can take rejection extra hard.

Harsh rejection impairs your productivity by making you terrified to show your work—and so you procrastinate as a way of avoiding that. (If you don't finish, you can't show!).

The solution is two-fold:

(a) Start showing your work, even if only a paragraph or sentence at a time. (E.g., “What do you think of this paragraph? I know it needs editing, but I'm pretty proud of the main point.” Or, “Do you have any suggestions for this paragraph? I can't quite get it right.”) Be very selective in whom you choose to share with, especially initially: neither your supervisor nor family members may be the right choice. Most graduate students benefit from having a “writing buddy” or two to provide moral support, and gentle feedback and encouragement: such a person would be a great choice, and you can also tell her exactly what feedback would be helpful. (“I just want your overall thoughts on the piece—please don't worry about the grammar.”)

(b) Defuse the underlying traumatic rejection through discussions with sympathetic friends and colleagues, journaling, or therapy. In some cases, you can address the person who rejected you directly, especially if you feel that they are not fundamentally mean or vindictive. (That's the best reason to only seek to work with good, kind, generous people, and avoid the others regardless of how illustrious

they are.) They may not have meant to hurt you, and may not even be aware they did. By having a non-blamey heartfelt conversation, you may get your healing plus affirm the relationship.

2) Challenging / Traumatic Field Work and Other Research

Sometimes graduate students whose field work or other research was emotionally challenging are reluctant to “re-visit” it via writing. I’ve seen this in students in fields like anthropology or sociology, and also in historians researching topics like genocide. If the student has a personal connection to the topic—e.g., his grandparents were Holocaust survivors—or has bonded with his research subjects, this can make the situation even more fraught.

Sometimes just acknowledging the emotional challenge is enough to defuse it, especially if you’ve got a good support network. Journaling can also help you sort out your feelings. But sometimes you need professional help to deal with what might be actual trauma or which, along with being a mental health issue, can seriously degrade your productivity.

If you are wondering whether you should seek out a professional for this kind of issue, you should probably just go ahead and do so.

Ideally, academic departments would recognize that some types of research have the potential to create emotional difficulties for students, and do some work to prepare students and minimize the harm. But I've never seen one that did.

3) An Activist Component

Many thesis projects either intentionally or unintentionally challenge the status quo, and therefore can be considered activist as well as academic projects. When you add activism to scholarship, you add layers of intellectual, emotional, and strategic complexity. Intellectually and emotionally, your work could challenge not just you, but your committee members or others. Strategically, it could limit your career options.

It's wonderful if you want to combine academics and activism, but do so knowingly, and with abundant support from other scholar/activists. In particular, you will have to figure out how to balance your activism with your career goals, especially if you're hoping for a job at a conservative institution – which is not necessarily a sell-out, by the way, since we need radical viewpoints inside the system as well as outside it. It's also not a sell-out to: (a) incorporate your radical views gradually into your work, so that your thesis might not actually be that radical; (b) collaborate with

nonradicals; or (c) present a conventional / nonthreatening appearance that makes it easier for your more traditional colleagues to accept your more radical message. In fact, these moves are often brilliantly strategic.

For more on what an activist mission entails, see my book on sustainable activism, *The Lifelong Activist*; entire text available for free at www.lifelongactivist.com).

4) *Research Qualms*

- “Not enough.”
- “Not the right kind.”
- “Too narrow.”
- “Too theoretical.”
- “Not as interesting as I thought.”
- “If only I could go back and...”

Many graduate students are dissatisfied with the results of their research, and that dissatisfaction, especially when coupled with regret, remorse, guilt, etc., can cause them to stall on their writing. Second-guessing your research is a pure waste of time, however; if your supervisor and committee think your research is adequate, you should accept their judgment and focus on your writing.

More generally, a major challenge in many fields, including

academia, is learning to live with, and keep working past, your mistakes ([Here's a terrific video on that](#)) It only makes sense that you'll make some mistakes and misjudgments in what is probably your first big research project; and you definitely want to comprehend your weaknesses (and strengths, of course) as a scholar. When, however, your self-analysis crosses the line into harsh perfectionism—which typically leads to unproductive procrastination and dithering—you're not doing yourself any favors.

So, keep your critical eye, and definitely create the list of things you would have done better “had you only known.” Then take those steps—on your next project.



FOR STUDENTS
AND ACADEMICS

Advice for Academics (Graduate Student and Faculty)

Excerpted from Hillary Rettig's book *The Seven Secrets of the Prolific*

I. Managing Your Relationship with Your Advisor

1) My most important advice for graduate students is to never work for anyone who is cruel, exploitative or negligent. I don't care how brilliant or charismatic they are – and charisma, by the way, often masks narcissism. I also don't care how amazing their c.v. is, or how many doors they can open. Also, don't work for someone who is flaky, irresponsible or a tantrum thrower. Without a foundation of honesty, integrity, compassion and basic fairness in your relationship with your advisor,

you are very vulnerable. (Hopefully, you'll get this advice before you've chosen an advisor, but if you've already done so, it applies throughout your career, and life.)

2) *Delineate boundaries and expectations with your advisor.* Honestly, it's really her job to do this, but she might not know how, or even that she should. So you should. Ask how she prefers to work and communicate with her students, and accommodate those preferences as much as possible.

Set up a regular weekly or biweekly meeting, and save as many of your questions or concerns for that meeting as possible. (Obviously, in cases where you truly need fast input, you shouldn't wait.) This is true even if you see your advisor all the time casually, since casual conversations are not a substitute for formal meetings.

3) *Be a good colleague.* Show up for seminars, and participate. If you're shy or otherwise inhibited, seek professional help, since that can hinder your career.

Join a committee. Forge ties with other faculty members, as well as postdocs, other grad students and admins. Don't isolate yourself, even if (especially if!) you're behind on deadlines. Building a broad base of support in and beyond

your department is not only a good career move, but gives you protection in case your advisor becomes problematic. There are few people more professionally vulnerable than a graduate student locked in tight orbit around a dysfunctional thesis advisor.

Of course you will need good time management (Part 4) to ensure you're balancing your responsibilities properly.

4) *Especially in times of crisis, give credence to your own thoughts and feelings.* If you are feeling undersupported, misused, exploited or discriminated against, you probably are. Seek help, starting perhaps with someone outside the organization (e.g., a coach or therapist who works with other academics).

And remember: you didn't get this far by being weak or thin-skinned, so don't let anyone tell you you're being weak now. Anyone who says that, or that it's your job to grow a thicker skin, is ignorant, if not an active oppressor.

5) *Especially, though not exclusively, for women: watch out for sexism and sexist critiques.* Sexism remains rampant in academia, and I rarely meet an underproductive female academic who hadn't experienced serious – and, in some cases, devastating – sexism,

sexual harassment or sexual exploitation. Again, your priorities should be to, (a) give credence to your own perceptions of, and feelings about, your reality; and (b) seek help.

If someone labels your concerns “complaints,” “whines” or “nags,” be aware that those words have strong sexist connotations, and are often used to deprecate women’s valid concerns, and silence their voices.

6) Follow the advice in this book. Make a plan, with deadlines and deliverables, for getting your degree. Do your time management. Work to eliminate perfectionism. Ask for help early and often. Equip yourself with abundant resources. And, most especially, work in community. Community doesn’t just provide support and grounding, but tried-and-true solutions to many of the problems you’re likely to encounter.

7) Particularly when you’re just starting graduate school, remember that graduate level writing requires a different process than undergraduate writing. Many graduate students I know could write a decent undergraduate paper in a single sitting without breaking a sweat, but when they tried the same trick in graduate school they ran aground (Chapter 2.5). When starting graduate school, adjust your writ-

ing process to handle the longer and more challenging assignments. Don't forget to ask your advisor and others for help!

8) *Unionize.* It's a fundamental tool of empowerment. Check out www.thecgeu.org for more information.

When Researching and Writing Your Thesis

9) *Professionalize,* by which I mean invest time and money in tools and techniques that will boost your effectiveness, including not just a good computer and backup system. **Make** abundant use of your university's writing center; and if you need counseling or coaching, go right out and get it. Your institution probably offers it for free, but if it doesn't or if it's not working for you, do your best to pay for it. Group sessions are cheaper¹, or you might be able to find a therapist who offers a sliding scale. Your school probably also has some graduate student support groups, or you could organize one using meetup.com – an empowering act that doesn't have to take up too much time.

10) *Jettison as many other responsibilities as possible.* Reducing commitments not only frees up time, but reduces stress, so get your family to take on as

many of your responsibilities and chores as possible, or hire someone. Also, take a leave from extraneous projects, committees and campaigns. Be ruthless and “overdo it”: even if you think you’ll be able to handle a certain commitment while writing, you’ll almost certainly be glad later if you give it up now.

If you have a spouse who can support the family while you write, give up the teaching gig. If a family member or someone else offers a gift of money or an easy-term loan, take it if you don’t think doing so will lead to uncomfortable family dynamics.

If there are responsibilities you can’t delegate, understand that it will take you longer to finish your thesis than someone without those responsibilities. This point would seem obvious, but I talk to grad students all the time who are kicking themselves for not working at the same pace as less-encumbered colleagues.

11) Be cognizant of your work’s activist aspects. Many research projects either intentionally or unintentionally challenge the status quo, and therefore can be considered activist as well as academic projects – and, often, graduate students get hung up because they don’t realize what that implies.

When you add activism to scholarship, you add layers of intellectual, emotional, and strategic complexity. Intellectually and emotionally, your work could challenge not just you, but your committee members or others. Strategically, it could limit your career options.

It's wonderful if you want to combine academics and activism, but do so knowingly, and with abundant support from other scholar/activists. In particular, you will have to figure out how to balance your activism with your career goals, especially if you're hoping for a job at a leading institution – which is not necessarily a sell-out, by the way, since we need radical viewpoints inside the system as well as outside it. It's also not a sell-out to, (a) incorporate your radical views gradually into your works, so that your thesis might not actually be that radical; (b) collaborate with nonradicals; or (c) present a conventional / nonthreatening appearance that makes it easier for others to accept your message. In fact, those moves are often brilliantly strategic.

For more on what an activist mission entails, see my book, **The Lifelong Activist; How to Change the World Without Losing Your Way** (Lantern Books, 2006) at www.lifelongactivist.com.

And, finally,

12) If you think academic writing is somehow special, and so the advice in the rest of this book doesn't apply to you, get over it. Academics commingle with other writers in my classes, and the advice helps them as much or even more than the others. (More, because of the huge amount of perfectionism in academia.) Thinking your work is too complex, intellectual, esoteric or otherwise special to follow the basic rules of writing productivity is nothing but perfectionist grandiosity.

You'll find advice and solutions to all of the above in *The 7 Secrets of the Prolific*. For fastest progress, try coaching. If you want me to give a workshop for your department, [click here](#). And don't forget to check out my Academic Success Catalyst Program for a powerful supportive community that will help you finish your thesis or book as quickly, and easily, as possible.



PRODUCTIVITY

DURING TOUGH TIMES



PRODUCTIVITY
DURING TOUGH TIMES

On Trying to Write While Sitting in the Midst of the Battle of Hogwarts

An author friend of mine recently wrote on Facebook (and gave me kind permission to post):

“Almost impossible to work these days. It feels like I’m sitting in the entrance hall of Hogwarts trying to write...while the final battle with Voldemort and the Death Eaters is raging around me.”



She’s not alone. Recently YouTube celebrity (and prolific vlogger) Hank Green tweeted:

- “This election has been consuming. It’s been a source of constant anxiety and is reinforcing unhealthy behaviors for me.” (He followed up with one that said: “But that’s mostly because, it matters so goddamn much.”)

To which, prolific, bestselling, science fiction author John Scalzi replied:

“The damn election is partly why I am behind on this book I’m writing. I hate I’m distracted, but it’s my country.”

Okay, so if you’re finding the election distracting—and my apologies to my non-US readers for another U.S.-centric newsletter, but the principles do apply generally—you’re in good company. And I’m with you, by the way: as I reported in a prior newsletter, I’ve also been distracted.

You see, the first thing I aspire to do, nearly every morning, is grab a coffee and then head **immediately** over to my book-writing computer (which has no Internet, email, games, or other distractions), and start working on my current book project. (It’s a productivity guide for undergraduates, by the way.)

These days, however, I often find myself making a post-coffee detour to my **non**-writing computer to check out the latest news and social media.

And when, finally, I do sit down to write my book, my work intervals are shorter. Pre-election season, I usually wrote 60-90 minutes before taking a break. Now, it's more like 30 to 60 minutes. And, when break time comes, I often again get sucked into the news and social media. (I've started timing my breaks, which is a good way to guard against that.)

It's pretty clear that the combination of contentious politics and ubiquitous social media has created a "distraction bomb" many are struggling to cope with. Here are some suggestions for coping:

- First, **don't beat yourself up over it**. Not just because many prolific, experienced writers (and others) are also distracted, but because harsh self-judgment and punishments are perfectionist, and perfectionism is always a dead end. Try, in fact, to view the situation more positively, as a great opportunity to practice and grow your focus.
- In fact, at times when you're disappointing yourself, you need to go the opposite route and **double down on your self-kindness and compassion and understanding**. See Solution #2 on this page and #3 on this one.

- **Don't fall into the trap of thinking there's one "right answer."** I can't tell you how much time to devote to your work versus your politics. I can't even tell myself! There's no one right answer that fits every person and situation; also, no good way of judging your choices except in hindsight. (And, really, don't bother. Analyze your choices, if you want, and make a plan to choose better in the future, if needed, but don't bother judging.)
- **Work in timed intervals**, as described here (#4). Intervals help keep you accountable, and they also help you avoid perfectionism. As noted above, my intervals are shorter than they usually are, but I'm still making daily progress.
- Also, as noted above, time your breaks so they don't get out of control. (By the way, I love [Datexx Cube Timers](#), which are fun and easy to use.)
- **Do your important work first thing in the morning**, before the day's news starts to flood in. If you have a job that interferes with that, see if you can shift your work hours to later.

Finally, realize that **there's a huge upside to this situation**. In her celebrated history [Team of Rivals](#), Doris Kearns Goodwin quotes Alexis de Toqueville on the crazy political

ferment of the early 19th century U.S.:

“Scarcely have you descended on the soil of America,” wrote Alexis de Toqueville in the year Lincoln was serving his first term in the state legislature, “when you find yourself in the midst of a sort of tumult; a confused clamor is raised on all sides; a thousand voices come to your ear at the same time, each of them expressing some social needs. Around you everything moves...”



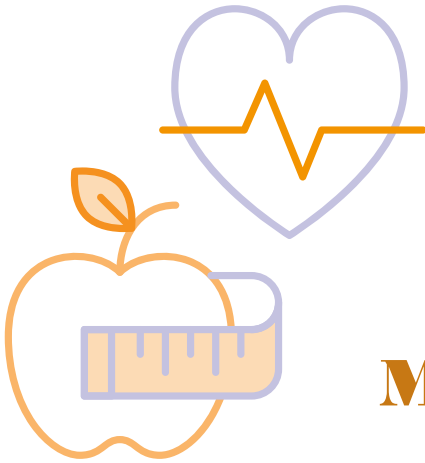
Sound familiar? And in the midst of all that tumult, the character of one of our country’s foremost statespersons, Abraham Lincoln, was formed, as well as the characters of many other great persons.

So take heart! There’s plenty of evidence that a new generation of great leaders is on the rise, catalyzed by the very same social media and other forces that are making it (temporarily) hard to work. That’s a GREAT upside.

In the meantime, though, let’s you and me both get back to work...

PS – Check out [my exclusive interview with Scalzi](#) about his work habits and time management.

PPS – Don't forget to vote! Not just for the president, but the downticket candidates.



PRODUCTIVITY
DURING TOUGH TIMES

Self-Care Now More Than Ever!

Here's a reminder that self-care becomes even more important during stressful times. The need for self-care would seem obvious, except that some on the right deride people who ask for it as weak, and a culture that supports it as dysfunctional. That attitude diffuses into the general culture and causes people to feel guilty about wanting or needing self-care.

Some good people also feel guilty for “taking time off” to care for themselves when there's important social justice work to be done or others in need of serious help. But your disempowering yourself through self-neglect isn't going to help anyone. (To paraphrase the airlines, you have to put the oxygen mask on yourself before helping others.) Many successful activists (and others, of course) devote hours



Audre Lorde

each day to exercise and other forms of self-care, which helps them maintain not just their health and energy, but motivation and focus.

As the poet and activist Audre Lorde famously wrote: *“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”*

I think most people know what self-care consists of: abundant sleep, good nutrition, exercise, recreation, socializing, and being proactive on any physical and mental health needs. But what it really is, is a commitment. If you’re not giving up other activities to care for yourself, you’re probably not really caring for yourself.

How much self-care do you need? The answer is, “as much as you need.” Part of self-care is listening to, and trusting, yourself. If you feel like you need more sleep, or more time off, or to consult a doctor, therapist or other professional, respect that truth and act accordingly. Almost all of us need more self-care than we like to admit, but denying one’s need for it is perfectionist (shortsighted and grandiose), and therefore a dead end.

And never, ever judge your need for self-care, because that's also a perfectionist dead end.

An under-discussed aspect of self-care is filtering your inputs, both offline and especially online. If your social media feed is currently an ongoing stream of panic, fear, rage, grief, negativity, and other disempowering emotions, it's not helping either you or the cause. (Or, probably, the people posting.) So filter it (and your offline discussions, if necessary) to let in more information and strategies and empathy and compassion, and (much) less of the discouraging stuff. This probably means removing some people from your feed, which might lead to some social awkwardness. But you should experience a pretty quick rise in your mood.

Please note that I'm not saying that the fear, grief, etc., are unwarranted. I just think there's a point (different, perhaps, for each of us) where it's healthier to move on to step #2: resistance. Paraphrasing the famed early 20th century labor organizer Joe Hill, "Don't mourn. Organize."

Finally, invest time in taking care of others in your orbit—and not just your loved ones. "Random acts of kindness"—even just a welcoming smile to a stranger—cost little or nothing and make both you and the recipient feel good.

And each one strikes a blow, however small, against hate.

If you have thoughts or suggestions on self-care please leave them as a comment!





6

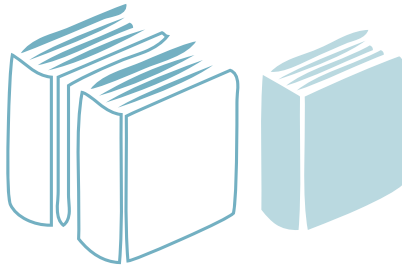


CAREER

BUILDING

FOR WRITERS,

ARTISTS, AND OTHERS





Success and Loss

Success can bring a sense of loss, as Joan Bolker eloquently notes in Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day:

“How do we deal with the fact that there is sadness as well as joy about each major step we take forward – including finishing a doctoral degree? You may expect that you will feel only relief and pleasure when you earn your degree, so you may be startled by feelings of loss and sadness. Maybe you will grieve that a major stage of your life is over, or perhaps you will mourn the important people who are not alive to witness your triumph, or maybe you’ll confront the gap between the dissertation you’ve

actually written and the one you imagined you would write...Every major life change destroys the equilibrium of our lives and our self-image and leaves behind a portion of an old self.”

I’m guessing that, for many people, a sense of impending loss is a major, and unrecognized, barrier that’s keeping them from completing their current step, or taking the next one.

I’m also thinking about how sometimes you do the right thing and it simply doesn’t work out too well. Or, it works out as well as possible but there are loose ends. Or, for whatever reason, you’ve still got that queasy, unsettled feeling. Whenever you give up a bad habit, or a bad relationship, or anything, it still feels like a loss and you will probably need to grieve. (The practice of nonviolent communications teaches us mourn instead of regret.)

I meet people all the time who took the moral course, the courageous course, or even the only course, and feel confused or guilty because the outcome wasn’t 100% happy or clean. In fact, expecting it to be 100% anything is perfectionist. So is expecting yourself to be psychic and capable of perfectly predicting the outcome of an action.

The world is filled with pitfalls, but it’s up to you to be

the kindest possible nurturer of yourself instead of the harshest judge. It's also a good idea to plan for success so that you're not caught off guard by its shadow side.

How to Cope With Clueless Questions, Crass Comments, and Crazy Conjectures

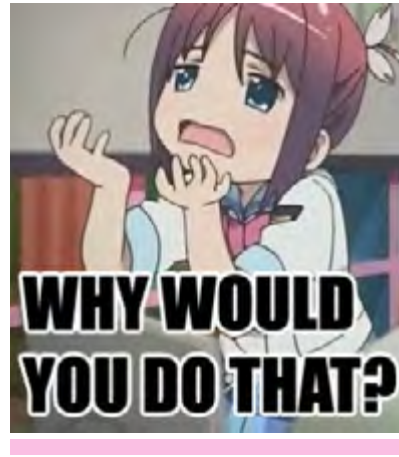
Note: I'm re-upping this one from 2013, as it seems a useful follow-up to the Robert Caro post. Also see this piece on [Advice for Academic Couples](#) (excerpted from my book *The 7 Secrets of the Prolific.*) – Best, Hillary

Oh, the things people say to writers!

- “What do you do?”
- “What do you write?”
- “Is there any money in that?”
- “Where have you been published?”
- “How’s the book coming along?” (Alt: “When will you

be done with that thing?”)

- “Why don’t you just sit down over a weekend and just finish it?”
- “You should write like Stephen King!”
- “You should put a vampire in it!”
- “Why don’t you just go on [popular TV show]?” And, the ever popular,
- “When are you going to get a real job?”



These are the kinds of (often, but not always) well-meaning questions, comments, and conjectures that bedevil writers. A little planning can help a lot in terms of coping, however. Below are strategies for: (a) increasing your tolerance for difficult questions; (b) maintaining conversational boundaries; and (c) dealing with hostility.

Increasing your Tolerance for Difficult Questions, Comments, and Conjectures

By far the best thing you can do to increase your tolerance is to work on your own perfectionism and ambivalence. If a part of you actually believes you’re “taking too long” to finish your book, or that writing is a waste of time when it doesn’t earn any money, then any hint to that ef-

fect from someone else is bound to hurt. In contrast, the more grounded and realistic you are around your work, the more resilient you will be in the face of challenging questions or comments.

Also, think about your motive when answering questions. If it's to convince the questioner of the validity of your viewpoint – for instance, that money really isn't the most important thing in writing or life – then you're already in trouble. You can't be responsible for what other people think, and certainly won't convince anyone by lecturing.

The best way to convince people about the value of your path is to live it proudly, productively, and joyfully.

When a friend or loved one repeatedly asks, “How much did you write today?” it can stress you out even if they mean well. Explain to them that nagging isn't helpful, and that a better way to support you is to: (1) do the dishes or laundry so you have more time to write, and (2) be a compassionate and nonjudgmental listener.

Maintaining Conversational Boundaries

Of course, there could be other reasons you don't like to answer questions. Perhaps you find them invasive, or perhaps you're shy, or perhaps you don't like small talk. Many

writers, I've found, are uncomfortable with superficial conversations, especially about their work.

I believe that even the most reticent writer should be able to tell people that she's a writer, since withholding a fundamental truth about yourself creates shame. What you say beyond that, however, is up to you. (I favor a lot of candor, but know that approach isn't for everyone.) Delimiting conversations can be tricky, however, so here are a few tips:

- ***Talk About Writing in General.*** The answer to, "Where do you get your ideas?" doesn't have to be some kind of uncomfortable self-exposure, but a more general statement of how writers work. ("Well, you know, we get our ideas from all over.") If your questioner presses for specifics, just say, "I actually don't like to talk about the specifics of my work." Most people will respect that.
- ***Talk About Your Past Works, but Not Your Current Work.*** "I prefer not to talk about the project I'm currently working on," is a great reply that people usually respect.
- ***Answer Without Justifying.*** If, after you tell

someone you've been working on your novel for four years, they reply, "Isn't that a long time?" refrain from going into a long, defensive explanation of how complex your novel is, how much research it took, etc., and simply correct the questioner's information, "Actually, it's not. Many novels take years to write."

- ***Deflect.*** E.g., "You know, I really don't like to talk about my projects, but you seem very interested in books – what do you read?" This often works because most people like to talk about themselves even more than they like to talk about your writing!
- ***Use Humor.*** If someone asks, rudely, how much money you make from your writing, you can embarrassedly mutter, "None." Or, grin crazily and say, "Oh, millions!" Humor can be tricky, though, so if your listener is simply not getting it, it's a good idea to switch to another tactic.

Keep in mind that how you say something is at least as important as your choice of words: if you yourself are confident and at ease with your choices, all but the most obtuse questioners will get the point.



Dealing with Hostility

Always assume questioners are innocent until proven guilty. If someone asks me a clueless or even callous question, I try to give them benefit of the doubt, because I've asked my own share of clueless and callous questions over the years.

If someone is truly insulting or offensive or hostile, however, you shouldn't tolerate that. You have two basic choices: to either not interact with him anymore, or (if you value the relationship) to explain to him why his comment is inappropriate and how you would like to be treated in the future. If you do that and the person continues mistreating you, I would: (a) end the friendship or acquaintanceship, or (b) if it's a family member, forbid conversation about your writing.

These steps may seem extreme, but they're essential. You must protect your creative core from those who would undermine you.

Don't Let them Stop You

The most important tip about dealing with challenging questions is to never let them stop you. High achievers in

every field say the same thing: “I thought about quitting during a difficult period, but knew that that wouldn’t accomplish anything.”

So, you shouldn’t quit, either.

Amanda Palmer on Artistic Legitimacy

Musician Amanda Palmer recently gave a keynote at Grub Street Writer’s Muse and the Marketplace Conference. She’s whip smart and really “gets” this brave new world of social media, and so we should always listen to what she has to say.

Her talk at Grub was about something much more important than social media: it was about legitimacy.

That’s a huge topic in artistic productivity, and a major focus of class discussions. Some writers think, for example, that until they’ve been published in the “right” way and by the “right” people, they aren’t “real writers.” So:

Published by a commercial publisher? Real Writer! Go forth and conquer.

Indie published? Fake Writer! Hang your head in shame.

Published in established literary magazine. Real Writer. Published on a blog (yours or someone else's)? Fake.

Similarly, some artists believe they're not "real" until they've been invited to participate in certain shows, represented by certain galleries, or reviewed by certain magazines.



Amanda Palmer speaking on artistic legitimacy and why artists should embrace the "wild west" realities of promotion at Grub Street Writers. Legitimacy, community, and "coming out" as an artist are all linked, and all essential for your success. But you can do it a little at a time, at a comfortable rate.

Feelings of illegitimacy are a huge barrier to productivity and success because they cause artists to isolate themselves from their colleagues, audience, mentors, and other needed communities.

I can usually tell when an artist's been isolated because he: (1) is blocked, and (2) makes weird or unproductive decisions. He might, for instance, sell and market his work incompetently, or have unreasonable expectations for its success. (#2 is a major cause for #1, incidentally.)

Isolated artists often decline to participate in groups, conferences, or workshops until they've reached a self-designated milestone. (For example, "I'll get a story published and then join a group.") **They have it exactly backwards, because it's your interactions with your communities that create your success.** Participation not only yields vital information and contacts, it's an antidote to any shame, guilt, embarrassment, or ambivalence that may be holding you back.

Here's Palmer's take on legitimacy.

Who decides?

i think, when we were young, when we envisioned our future selves as artists, we pictured ourselves some-

how being hauled (or hauling ourselves) over that mythical fence where we'd leave behind the ranks of amateurs, hacks and other wannabes and bask in the glow of the arrival on the other side, where those waiting titles start to sound almost erotic: "published" (for the musician, "signed") ...legitimate! recognized as authentic!

ah...to be introduced at a grown-up cocktail party by a famous artist twice your age as "the real deal".

*so who does that? where does it come from?
or maybe: who used to do it, and who does it now?*

does it have to come from above, or can it come from each other?

....because, in the wise words of bob dylan, more or less: shit is changing, and it's changing FAST.

it's changing at the speed of the internet.

i remember the first time i realized that my blog was actually a place for "real" art, and not just some semi-artistic smart-sounding rendering of what was happening with my band and in my life.

it was november 2005 and the dresden dolls were off

tour, recording some music at home here in boston.

i went for a walk in the public garden, right here, reflecting on everything that was going on around me, with a song by casey diene in my headphones and i saw something unusual. bobbing there, in the murky waters of the swan boat pond, surrounded by dying fall vegetation, there was an green empty bottle of miracle-gro. i thought this was the saddest and most hilarious thing i'd ever seen. the dots started to connect.

if i hadn't had a blog, it would have been a song. if i hadn't learned piano, it might have just been a poem. the format, doesn't matter so much.

i went home, wrote a blog that was sort of a poem and sort of not, remember reading back what i'd written and thinking: this is art. it's "writing". the dots connected, i shared.

and back then, i had a small blog readership, and the heads nodded in the distance at what i wrote.

that's all i needed. it never occurred to me to try to "publish" anything i'd written. as far as i was concerned, i had "published" it...on my blog.

Watch her entire talk—it will be well worth your time.

After you've watched the movie, read Grub Street Writers founder Eve Bridburg's take on Palmer's speech and the issue of writer's legitimacy.



Seth Godin and Jennifer Crusie on Artistic Legitimacy

Following onto the post about Amanda Palmer’s exhortation to legitimize yourself as an artist, instead of waiting for gatekeepers to do so, here are marketing guru Seth Godin and best-selling romance author Jennifer Crusie on the same topic.

First, Godin:

No knight, no shining armor

“Sure, Seth can do that, because he has a popular blog”

Some people responded to my decision to forgo tradition-

al publishers (not traditional books, btw) by pointing out that I can do that because I have a way of reaching readers electronically.

What they missed is that this asset is a choice, not an accident.

Does your project depend on a miracle, a bolt of lightning, on being chosen by some arbiter of who will succeed? I think your work is too important for you to depend on a lottery ticket. In some ways, this is the work of the Resistance, an insurance policy that gives you deniability if the project doesn't succeed. "Oh, it didn't work because we didn't get featured on that blog, didn't get distribution in the right store, didn't get the right endorsement..."

There's nothing wrong with leverage, no problem at all with an unexpected lift that changes everything. But why would you build that as the foundation of your plan?

The magic of the tribe is that you can build it incrementally, that day by day you can earn the asset that will allow you to bring your work to people who want it. Or you can



In case the "white knight" himself isn't enough, here he is on a unicorn.

skip that and wait to get picked. Picked to be on Oprah or American Idol or at the cash register at Borders.

Getting picked is great. Building a tribe is reliable, it's hard work and it's worth doing.

Then, Crusie:

A Writer Without A Publisher Is Like A Fish Without a Bicycle: Writer's Liberation and You

It's a lot like my high school graduation: by graduation, I knew I had to have finished my education; by graduation, I had to have a life plan; by graduation, I had to be engaged to be married.

As you can probably tell from that last one, I graduated from high school in the sixties. Today it seems absurd that marriage would be a life goal for a woman, but anyone who was around for the pre-Lib days can tell you that the worst thing anyone could say about a woman back then was that she was an Old Maid. It was one step down from Whore because at least whores had men asking to spend time with them. When I got married six weeks before I turned twenty-two, my entire family heaved a sigh of relief. Close call.

The madness that defined women's lives back then was based on four Big Lies:

- A woman wasn't a real woman until she was married.
- A woman had to distort herself and deny her own identity in order to catch a man to marry. (Remember girdles, spike heels, inane laughter, playing dumb, and flunking math?)
- Any husband was better than no husband.
- Staying in a bad marriage was better than divorce because God forbid a woman should be unmarried again once she'd finally achieved the goal.

Dumb, wasn't it? Thank God for Women's Liberation. You know the Women's Libbers, the ones who said "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle," and we all went, "Oh." And thank God for Gloria Steinem, who said, "Marriage is a fine institution, but I'm not ready for an institution yet." She's the one (among others) who pointed out that waiting for somebody else to grant validation meant giving up control over our lives. She's the one (among others) who clued us all in and made us stronger and helped guarantee our daughters didn't fall for the same old lies.

Unfortunately, Gloria didn't go far enough, probably because she didn't belong to RWA. She didn't see the same insidious forces at work in publishing, the same uncon-

scious assumptions, the same frustration and depression. She didn't see that just as women had to give up being married as a life goal before they could lead full lives as women, so writers must give up being published as a career goal before we can lead full lives as writers.

She didn't see it, but that doesn't mean we can't, so let's look at the Big Lies we tell ourselves:

- A writer isn't a real writer until she's published.
- A writer has to distort herself and deny her own stories in order to write to the trends and catch an editor to publish her. (Can you write babies, cowboys, daddies, secrets, or amnesiac brides?)
- Any publication is better than no publication.
- Staying in a bad publishing situation is better than leaving because God forbid a writer should be unpublished again once she's finally achieved the goal.

Those four Big Lies are as dumb as the ones we told ourselves about marriage thirty years ago, and they're just as dangerous to our writing careers today as the old lies were to our emotional lives then for exactly the same reasons. Waiting for somebody else to come along and validate us means giving up all control over our lives. Publication, like marriage, is indeed a fine institution, but anyone who says, "My goal in writing is to be published" is making the

same mistake as the woman who said, “My goal in living is to be married.” Writing and living are about **us**, about who we are and what we want, about satisfying our needs as individuals, about listening to our hearts. . Please note, I am not saying give up publication (or marriage) entirely; I’m saying give it up as a **goal**.

Knight in Shining Armor? Mr. Right? Hmmm...I sense a common theme, do you?

Rather than wait to get rescued, go out and make your own fortune via indie publishing, crowdfunding, social media, and other new business models and technologies.

(I also write a lot about how to overcome feelings of illegitimacy in *The 7 Secrets of the Prolific*.)

“The Language of Loss for the Jobless”

That’s the name of a terrific article in today’s New York Times that discusses how people deal with the shame of being out of work. The best part is the section about how one marketing executive responds to people’s sympathy in an empowered way:

“And so by last weekend, merely two days after Bob Adler’s finale as a market research analyst at a Fortune 200 insurance company, some people in Montclair, N.J., already knew, largely due to the efforts of the gregarious Mr. Adler.

“I understand you’re sorry, so am I, but that doesn’t do me any good,’ Mr. Adler, who starts paying college tuition this fall, is telling those offering condolences. ‘If you really want to help, tell me what you think I do well, who you know, and where you think my skills fit best. And they were

grateful for being given that option and I was glad I could redirect the nature of the conversation pretty much on a dime.”

Note the specificity of his request – that’s very important. You have to help people to help you. A lot of networking fails because it’s too generalized and unstrategic. And a lot of people probably want to help you, but don’t know how.

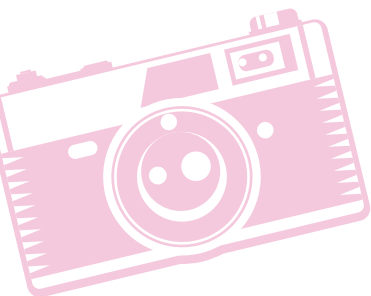
One person quoted also notes a gender discrepancy in the responses she got when she told people she was jobless:

“When Janette La Vigne, an insurance company executive from Clinton Township, N.J., was laid off 10 days ago, she immediately told fellow lacrosse moms. The women were empathetic and bracing, particularly those whose husbands had been through layoffs, said Ms. La Vigne, who had been with the same company for 21 years.

“But the guys are speechless,” she said. “They don’t know how to handle it. Their body language says, ‘Eww, I’m so glad I’m not you right now.’”

If you are currently between jobs, you might want to pay attention to which responses you get from which people, and how those responses make you feel. Then, really work to avoid those people who bring you down, while spend-

ing as much time as possible with those who make you feel supported. Being out of work is hard enough without dealing with people who are unsupportive or who project their own insecurities onto you.



CAREER BUILDING

Six Things You Should Never Say to a Photographer (Or, if You're a Photographer, Never Say to Yourself!)

by Soraya Rudofsky and Hillary Rettig

It's never easy to be a creator, or creative professional, but in the age of ubiquitous camera-phones, photographers have it particularly rough. Photographers, how often have you heard someone say one of these:

1. "Photography's easy, because the camera does all the work."
2. "Photography's not a real art like painting or sculpting where you need to build your skills. For photography you just need a good eye."

3. “You take such great pictures—you must have a great camera.”
4. “Could you take the pictures at our next family reunion?” (Alt: “Please bring your camera to my five-year-old’s birthday party that I invited you and your child to attend.”)
5. “It must be easy to run a photography business.”
6. “You don’t have a degree, so you’re not really a professional.”



Kiska Barking (c)2013 Soraya Rudofsky

These misconceptions are all around us, and they can do a number on our self-esteem as artists and professionals. They reflect not just a naivete about the realities of photography and photo businesses, but perfectionism, which causes us to oversimplify and deprecate both the creative process itself and the work of building a sustainable creative business.

Here’s the truth about photography and photographic businesses:

- A camera is only a tool that the photographer uses to realize her creative vision, just as painters use paintbrushes and paint to realize theirs. All artists use tools.

Moreover, most photographers work hard. A photographer might take twenty photos (or, in some cases, hundreds of photos) of the same thing using different angles, composition, lighting, apertures, lenses, etc., until they find the combination that works. Moreover, the chances are that the photo you see on the wall has been carefully edited with extreme attention to detail to achieve the final look (and this doesn't mean Instagram filters).

Non-professionals might point-and-shoot, or at most adjust their camera to a pre-set like Portrait or Landscape, but that barely touches the surface of the camera's use as a tool. Most professional photographers spend a lot of time learning the nuances of how to see, and how to use their camera to record what they see.

- Photographers spend years not just mastering lighting, composition, and other shooting skills, but developing their vision. Which is why...
- A good photographer can take a better picture with a bad camera than a bad photographer can take with a good one.
- It's no more a compliment to ask a photographer to work for free than it is to ask a doctor, lawyer, etc. Sure, the photographer will probably be glad you like

his work, and he may be happy to volunteer once in a while. But his time and talent are valuable and, in the case of professionals, the means by which he makes a living. If you wouldn't ask a baker for free bread, or the hardware store for free hammers, you shouldn't ask a photographer for free photographs.

- No business is easy, including businesses that “look easy.” Moreover, many professional photographers earn at least part of their living photographing weddings and other events, which is about the most high pressure gig of all. (Imagine coping with frazzled brides and grooms—not to mention, their families—week after week!)

Most photography businesses fail within the first year.

- Degrees are irrelevant. While there are excellent degree programs out there, many great photographers, including Ansel Adams, Herb Ritz, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, were mainly self-taught. In photography, as in many other fields, degrees are a perfectionist “fetish”—a relentless, but ultimately meaningless, focus for perfectionist self-criticism.

(Please note we're talking about degrees, not training! Training is very valuable to photographers as it is to artists of all sorts.)

The above misconceptions do hold a lot of photographers back, so it would be great if all photographers would do their part in: (a) making sure they themselves are absolutely clear on the truth of the situation, and (b) pushing back (gently!) on the misconceptions when they do encounter them. That would make life easier for all photographers.

There's also another set of problems that hold photographers back—perfectionism and traumatic rejections. We'll discuss those in a followup article.

Do You Suffer From Marketer's Block?

Recently, I've noticed an interesting evolution in the writing productivity classes I teach.

Up until a few years ago, writers almost always took one of my classes because they were procrastinating or blocked on a book or other work. These days, however, many who take my classes have finished their book: it's their marketing they're stuck on.

And many of those who are stuck are indie publishers.

What gives?

To understand what’s going on, you first need to understand that procrastination isn’t caused by laziness, lack of discipline, lack of commitment, or any other lack, but disempowerment. Disempowerment means you’re not missing anything; just separated from, or constrained from using, that which you have. Locate and remedy the disempowering forces in your work and life, and your energy, discipline, commitment, etc., will “automagically” reappear. Here’s more info on how to do that.

So what would disempower an indie publisher?

The major disempowering forces are: perfectionism, ambivalence, resource constraints, unmanaged time, ineffective work processes, traumatic rejections, and a disempowering career path. I characterize them all, and detail their solutions, in my book *The 7 Secrets of the Prolific*. Perfectionism is the most serious because it undermines you in many ways, and also impairs your ability to solve the rest.



But let's look at that last one: disempowering career path. In the bad old days of traditional publishing, writers slogged away for years in a fundamentally disempowering system. You took years to write a novel; an editor or agent held onto the manuscript for months and then decided its fate in a few minutes (if you were lucky). And often, depending on how your publisher treated you and your work, getting accepted only brought on more disempowerment, since you would have little or no say over your book's cover, editing, and marketing.

In such a situation, where the odds are really stacked against a writer's success—especially if your work isn't trendy, or otherwise easily salable—procrastination actually makes sense as a way of “opting out” of an unfair and hopeless-seeming system. So that's what many blocked writers were doing: rebelling. This example illustrates two core features of procrastination:

1. Our reasons for doing it are always valid. **Always.**
2. It's a suboptimal response to a bad situation. Procrastination isn't a character flaw; it's simply a coping strategy. And it's even okay (and entirely human) to procrastinate once in a while. However, as a primary coping strategy, it's a disaster, and leads to a life of unfulfilled bitterness.



Cut to 2013, and the glories of indie publishing.

Most readers of the Newbie's Guide to Publishing blog know that indie is a a major liberating and empowering force for writers. As Joe himself recently wrote: "It truly is the best time in history to be a writer. There are no longer any boundaries. You can work with whomever you want to, at your own speed, get paid monthly, write about anything you want, do very little marketing, and still reach readers....What an amazing, incredible time to be alive. How lucky we all are."

I concur! I indie published *The 7 Secrets*, and wound up with a book I truly loved that is now helping many people and selling hundreds of copies a month in electronic and paper formats. Like many successful indie publishers, my main problem is not the disempowering drudgery of dealing with capricious and uncaring publishers, but finding the time to replicate my success by writing and marketing as many other books as possible. Believe me—it's a much better problem to have!

Which brings us to all the cases of Marketer's Block I'm seeing.

I think what's happening is that many writers, who final-

ly see themselves as having a realistic path to publishing via indie publishing, are no longer feeling disempowered when writing. And so they're finishing their books.

But then, after they start to market, it's a whole other story. Suddenly, they realize that marketing is not just a much bigger process than they had envisioned, it's also much slower. They had dreams of winning readers by the dozens or hundreds, but instead they're winning them a few (or one!) at a time, in what seems like a painfully slow effort.

They're also discovering that, while it's fantastic to have access to a superabundance of great marketing tools, it's also overwhelming. For many writers, figuring out the right mix of marketing tools and techniques is a constant challenge that's only getting tougher. A year ago, for instance, few writers had heard of email direct marketing companies like BookBub, BookGorilla, and BookBasset, but now they're all the rage.

It can all lead to a kind of overwhelm, decision fatigue, "analysis paralysis," and the feeling of disempowerment that leads to procrastination.

So what to do?

Here are some techniques that will help:

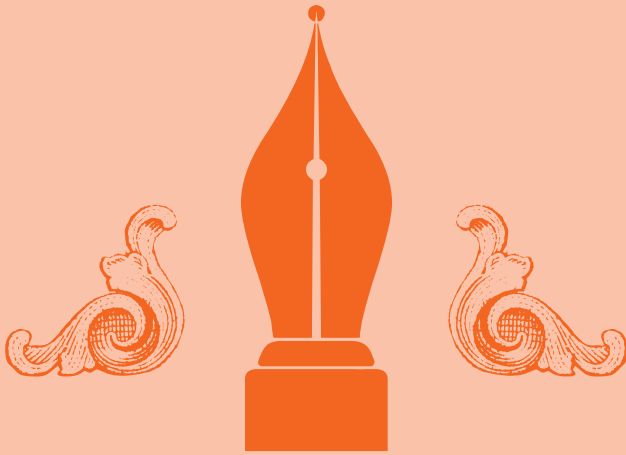
- 1. Acknowledge that you're in a business.** The writers who succeed are those with the clearest vision, and what they see most clearly is that indie publishing is a business. So they educate themselves on business (visit [SBA.gov](https://www.sba.gov) to learn about free resources in your area) and conduct themselves like businesspeople. ALL businesses, whether they're selling shoes or salsa or science fiction, require **lots** of marketing and sales; and the best any business can offer is a decent return on an investment, which means that to succeed, you need to be prepared to make initial investments of money, time, and attention.
- 2. Relatedly, lower your expectations.** Forget about the overdramatized, reductive, and probably untrue "overnight success" stories the media constantly pushes—they're not the norm. Indie publishing, like most businesses, is a long term endeavor, so work hard, moderate your expectations, and relish even your small successes (which probably aren't as small as you think).

3. Don't compare. In practically every class I teach, sooner or later someone starts complaining about *Fifty Shades of Grey*—how bad it is, how unfair it is that it's a best-seller, how much the world sucks for “real writers,” etc. (It used to be *Twilight*, by the way—writers can always find someone to envy; and while I'm at it, **let me remind you of Joseph Epstein's famous quote that, “Of the seven deadly sins, only envy is no fun at all.”**) It doesn't matter. Focus on writing the best books possible, and on doing the best possible marketing for those books, and your odds of a success that will be satisfying, if not stratospheric, will soar.



- 4. Work on your perfectionism.** Because it is the main brake on your productivity and success. It's not at all the same as having high standards; it's a toxic brew of unreasonable expectations, harsh self-punishments, grandiosity, shortsightedness, reductionism, dichotomization, and more. For the complete description, [click here](#). And for the solutions, [click here](#).
5. And, finally, **Have fun.** Because Joe is right: this is a golden age for writers. **The problem we have is the**

one we want to have: too much opportunity. It's the problem of the proverbial kid in the candy store, and, like the kid, all we have to do is pace ourselves and we're in for a great time.

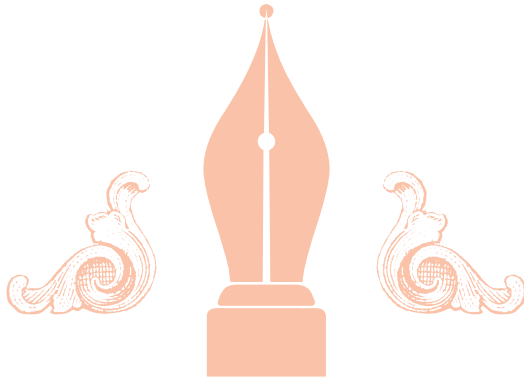




7



INTERVIEWS



Exclusive! John Scalzi's Time Management and Career Tips

Last week, the publishing world was abuzz with the news that bestselling science fiction author John Scalzi signed a movie-star-like \$3.4 million publishing deal for 10 books. Scalzi is someone I admire enormously, not just for his writing and career success, but because he's a genuinely nice guy, both offline (I've seen him at science fiction conventions) and online.

Along with his time management and career strategies, Scalzi is a social media powerhouse, so I also interviewed him on his social media strategies. And he's an out, proud, and smart feminist, antiracist, and LGBT ally who regularly speaks out in support of social justice; and who, in conse-

quence, has been a target of some of the Internet's obnoxious regressive elements. (Whom he handles with impressive good humor.) So another thing I asked him was about how he balanced his politics with his public professional persona.

Along with novels such as *Redshirts*, *Old Man's War*, and the new *Lock In*, two must-read Scalzi pieces are his poignant blog post on growing up poor and his brilliant explication on white, male privilege using gaming concepts.

Thanks to John for the interview and all his good works!

Hillary Rettig: How do you manage your time? Do you use any specific method or tools?

John Scalzi: When I am traveling on tour or for appearances, I tend to offload my time management to PR folks and/or media handlers. That's their job and they do it well, and they will keep track of where I need to be and when better than I will. At home, I keep things simple and use Google Calendar and my own brain. Seems to work so far.

HR: I know there's overlap and variance, but roughly how many hours a week do you spend (a) writing books (or screenplays, etc.), (b) doing social media and other marketing, and (c) managing your business?



JS: When I'm working on a project, I tend to work on that project in the morning, roughly from 8am to 12pm, so about four hours daily, 20 hours a week. 1pm through 5pm is for everything else, so another 20 hours a week. I tend to think of everything else as "everything else," rather than breaking it down more specifically. Note this is the ideal—things do get fudged in the real world.

HR: What would a typical daily schedule be when you're in writing mode (versus, say, travel)?

JS: Noted above: four hours creating (typically in the morning because my brain is fresh), four hours for everything else relating to the business.

HR: You do a lot of social media. Why do you do so much, and how do you prevent it from competing, timewise and writing-energy-wise, with your book writing?

JS: I don't think of it as doing so much, in part because I do it more to amuse myself than as a strategic part of my business. If you think of it as a thing I do rather than watching television, then why I do as much as I do be-

comes clear. And as with TV (or any other entertainment one uses to procrastinate) it is an attractive alternative to work. I find establishing and keeping to a schedule really helps.

HR: Do you consider yourself a fast writer? If so, what are some of your tips and tricks for writing fast?

JS: I can write 2,000 words a day without too much effort, which I do understand many folks see as writing quickly. The secret to this for me was to have spent several years as a professional journalist and getting used to writing quickly and on deadline. That said, I question whether for non-journalists writing fast is a virtue; the most important thing is finding the pace that works for you in terms of the quality of your work. Rather than focusing on writing fast, I would suggest people find their optimum speed for writing, and then build their schedules around that.

HR: What do you delegate, and to whom?

JS: When I'm on a project, and particularly closer to deadline, pretty much everything else is delegated to my wife, Kristine. I try to make it up to her other times. I occasionally consider hiring a part time assistant, but until and unless Krissy decides she doesn't want to bother anymore, this isn't likely to happen.

HR: You have made the choice to take public stands on political and social issues like feminism and gay rights. Leaving aside major blowups like GamerGate and PuppyGate—if that’s possible!—do you feel taking political stands has affected your career, and, if so, how?

JS: Not really, no, and that includes blowups like GamerGate and PuppyGate. I don’t suspect the vast majority of people who read my work know or care about my personal politics, and of those who do, I suspect the majority have decided that it’s fine for me to have political opinions as long as the work shows up and is readable. So that’s fine. There are a small number of people who will read me because of my positions; that’s nice. There’s also a small number who have decided not to read me because of my positions. That’s fine too. I’m not going to stop talking about political/social issues, pretty much ever, so anyone who has a problem with that should probably just bail out now and save themselves some time.

HR: At what point do you decide to take a public stand on a political/social issue, versus staying quiet and letting someone else take the stand? (Asking as an activist/author myself, and also author of The Lifelong Activist, a guide to sustainable progressive activism; I myself often find it hard to draw the line.)

JS: I have a pretty good sense of when I don't know about something, and I don't feel the need to be seen as a central figure in any movement, so when I don't know about something I'm more inclined to study up on it and learn more than to jump in with both feet. This saves me both from making an ass of myself (sometimes!) or being an unintentional sideshow regarding a larger issue. If you see me talking about something, it's either something I'm comfortable with my level of understanding about, or something where I feel my participation can be useful rather than self-aggrandizing.

HR: What was the smartest thing you ever did career-wise?

JS: Marry a partner who is smart and organized and engaged in my career and willing to put up with me. This isn't just blather — Krissy's organizational and financial skills gave us a solid foundation that allowed me to make smart long-term decisions about my career without having to worry too much about short-term, immediate financial/organizational needs. It's been huge, and I recognize it.

HR: What was your biggest mistake or regret?

JS: I'm very happy where I am with my career so it's hard for me to say I regret anything, because everything that's

happened has led to where I am right now. And while my career has not been flawless, I'm hard-pressed to come up with a mistake I want a do-over on. I suspect it's because some potential incidents that could have been mistakes happened at the same time as events that minimized their effect. I think the only thing I would change, really, is that I wouldn't have run for president of SFWA in 2007; I should have run for VP instead. This is a complicated story, too long to get into here. But even then, it didn't end poorly for me, so.

HR: What do you find (or have you found) the most challenging or difficult aspect of growing a fiction writing career?

JS: The amount of non-writing work it takes, in terms of appearances, touring, schmoozing and so on. The good news is it turns out I'm pretty good at those things. The bad news is that the more successful you are as a writer, the more time you do the non-writing stuff. Because people are excited to see you! And that helps sell more books. But I had no idea that being a successful writer would take so much time away from writing.

HR: Talking in terms of career management and success (not writing), who have been your best professional influences?

JS: I tend to look at how writers one (or more) steps up in terms of career popularity are handling their business. So as an example I look at how Neil Gaiman handles things to see if something he's doing (aside from writing what he does) is something I can use or adapt to my circumstances. Also with things like touring, I pick the brains of musicians and actors who've toured. My friend Mary Robinette Kowal helped me out immensely with this early on.

HR: What common business and/or marketing mistakes do you see writers make that inhibit their success? (Not talking about public obnoxiousness or bigotry.) And what advice would you give those writers?

JS: Two big things: One, doing social media like it's a chore, and two, believing everything they read on the Internet about "traditional" and/or "indie" publishing. To the first, if you hate the idea of tweeting or using Facebook or having a blog, don't do it; it'll be clear you hate it and no one will like it (or you) as a result. There are many ways to do publicity; find the one that works for you. To the second, the signal-to-noise ratio about publishing online, in any version of it, is pretty low, and the loudest people are the ones who are invested in their own particular viewpoint. Be critical of any piece of information about publishing you see; ask who it is who is saying it and what their own biases are.

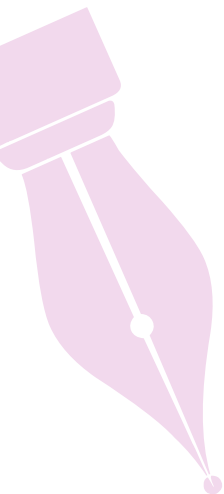
HR: You recently appear to have retired your longstanding “I like pie” tagline in favor of “All cake and hand grenades.” Why did you do that, and why are you now hating on pie?

JS: No, “I like pie” is still my Twitter bio. “All cake and hand grenades” is a quote from an NPR review of my novel *Lock In*. It’s a great image, so I stole it. That’s the subhead for *Whatever*, my blog. I change those subheads every few months on average.

HR: What else would you like people to know about your time management and career strategies?

JS: That I probably look more organized in the interview than I actually am.





Exclusive: Sharon Shinn's Time Management Tips!

I was recently thrilled to have the opportunity to interview bestselling fantasy / science fiction / romance / young adult novelist Sharon Shinn. Why all the genres? She's incredibly prolific. Moreover, she's prolific while holding down a full-time job. A writing job! It's just incredible.

I just had to find out how she does it—especially because she also happens to be one of my favorite authors. I especially love her popular Samaria series (the first volume of which, Archangel, is shown below), but all of her books are filled with great characters, suspenseful plots, fabulous world-building, and the kind of well-crafted prose that's a joy to read.

I hope you find Sharon’s time management insights as useful and inspiring as I do—and thanks to Sharon for the interview! (Also see previous interviews with best-selling science fiction writer **John Scalzi** and acclaimed free software activist and MacArthur “Genius” **Richard Stallman**.)
– Hillary

1. You are someone who works full time who has managed to write prolifically AND create a highly successful career as an author. How did you do that?

I think the answer is that I really streamlined my life. I took jobs that were interesting and paid good salaries, but didn’t require me to work 80 hours a week. So I had the time to write in the evenings and on weekends. I also didn’t take on a lot of extra responsibilities—I didn’t sign up for night classes, I didn’t belong to a volleyball league, I wasn’t tending a large vegetable garden in the back yard.



Now, I'm not a complete hermit and I do manage to have a social life, but the biggest chunks of my life go to working and writing.

I'm also always constantly watching how my time is deployed. My hope is to write four or five days a week, but I really need to sit down at the computer by 6 pm to be able to get in a solid block of writing time. If I can see that on one day I have a commitment that won't get me home until 6, I'll fill the rest of the evening with other tasks or errands that need to get done. So I have a haircut Tuesday night? OK, I'll also go grocery shopping and answer the emails I haven't gotten to that week. I've lost the writing time for that day, but I finish accumulated tasks so that other days are clear.

That being said, for the past three years I've been taking a yoga class one night a week, and I usually go out with a group for dinner afterward. I can definitely see how losing one night a week, every week, has impacted my productivity. Not willing to give up yoga—but I have to factor in that lost day when I set my mental deadlines!

2. Going into more detail: how many hours a week do you spend writing, and how many hours doing non-writing things related to your writing business? (Marketing, accounting, etc.) What is your daily or weekly schedule like?

My guess is I spend about 10 hours a week writing on average. I usually don't have the willpower to write for more than two hours at a stretch, and I usually try to get in five writing sessions a week. On the rare weekend when I don't have much else going on, I might manage two hours in the morning and another hour in the afternoon, but that requires a lot of discipline. Sometimes I just choose to watch TV instead.

I find rewriting easier than writing. The really hard push for me is the first draft, and that's when I can only manage a couple of hours at a time. When I'm doing rewrites, I can work longer hours and later into the night. So during the rewriting phase, it might be fifteen hours a week.

I don't spend much time on the nonwriting activities related to my career. I'm horrible at self-promotion, I don't tweet, I only recently started a [Facebook page](#). Probably the nonwriting activities that take the most time are answering fan emails and doing the occasional blog interview. And I don't have a good guess at how much time that takes because it's so cyclical, but probably only a few hours a week.

So my typical schedule is: Work at my day job from 9 to 5. If I haven't been able to sneak in a walk during that period of time, I usually take a half-hour walk at the end of the

work day. I hope to be back at the computer by 6, and I write until 7:30 or 8. Then I cram everything else in the next two or three hours—eating dinner, answering phone calls, putting away the dishes, catching up on TV shows. It can get a little frantic.

3. What's your general approach to social media? What do you do and don't do and why? How do you keep it from being a time sink?

I do very little. As I said, I've just launched my own Facebook page, but I only post about once a week. (For anyone who's read the Elemental Blessings books: I pull blessings every Monday morning and post them to the site.) I'd like to get a little better at this, posting something two or three times a week—but so far that hasn't happened often.

I don't blog and I don't tweet. I just don't have that much to say! But I admire the authors who do just bubble with ideas they want to share. I think it's a great way to connect with readers.

4. Ditto for travel. Do you do a lot of it to promote your books, and how do you determine when and where to go?

I usually attend at least one major science fiction/fantasy convention a year and sometimes two—most often the

World Science Fiction Convention or World Fantasy Convention. These are great fun because I get to meet fans but also hang out with other writers, and I love both opportunities. Between travel planning, actual travel, and travel recovery, each con absorbs about a week.

I haven't done much other travel to promote my books. I'm not at the level where my publisher is wanting to send me on tour! A couple of times when I've been in another city for another reason and I've had a connection with someone there, I've done a reading or a signing. A few years ago, when I was in London to visit a friend, I contacted a bookstore there and set up a signing. But this is relatively rare for me. I don't actually love to travel—and it disrupts my writing schedule—so I'm happiest when I don't have to leave the city.

5. You seem to break one of the cardinal rules of writers-with-jobs which is to not have a day job that involves writing. How do you manage to write forty hours a week for your job and then come home and do it some more?

You know, I find the two kinds of writing to be so different that I don't have a problem doing both in the same day. In some other interview somewhere, I've said that journalistic writing and creative writing are different but complementary skills, and I've been able to apply what I've

learned in one to what I do in the other. So, for instance, writing articles is like playing hymns and writing books is like playing jazz, but in each case your fingers are getting more familiar with the keys.

What I find difficult is that the physical act is the same—i.e., for both kinds of writing I'm sitting in a chair staring at a computer. That's hard. Which is usually why I try to walk or get in some kind of exercise in between the work day and the writing day. For the past 15 years I've worked from home, so I'm even at the exact same desk in the exact same chair. What I'll often do, just for some variety, is unplug the laptop and move to the couch when it's time to start working on the book.

6. What are the most important sacrifices or compromises you've made for your success?

I'm not sure that I've made sacrifices so much as choices, and those choices wouldn't work for a lot of people. For instance, I don't have kids. I think it would be impossible for me to work, write, and be a good mother. Now, I never particularly wanted kids, so this wasn't a problem for me, but for some people it's an unthinkable choice. If I had had children, I would have needed to give something up. I'd like to think it would have been the full-time job, but I can't see into that alternate history!

7. In your Samaria series you track the processes of enlightenment and industrialization in a civilization. You seem partial to the nomadic, nontechnological, and relationship-centered Edori, who have a physically arduous but very free and relaxed way of living. Could you tell us about how you developed them, and what your influences were? Also, what did you learn (esp. about time) from writing about them, especially as a counterpoint to the more industrialized Samaritans?

Yeah, I didn't learn anything from the Edori. I am the anti-Edori. I don't camp, I don't like communal living, I cannot manage their serene "let go and let God" attitude. So I think I just made them everything I'm not! I'm an industrialized Samaritan who cheers every advent of new technology.

8. What advice would you give other writers who want to be as successful as possible while having full-time jobs or other responsibilities?

I think the trick is to find a way to make the writing time sacred. What are the things in your life right now that are nonnegotiable? Your job, your volunteer work, your parenting responsibilities? Put writing at the same level. It is so easy to let writing be the first thing you give up—because you're tired, because you're doing it on spec, because you

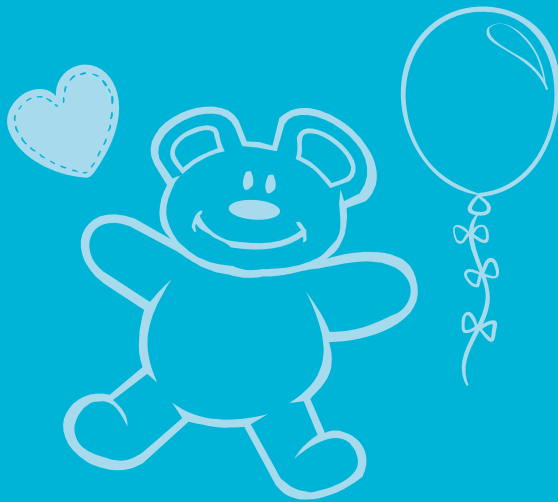
can get to that chapter tomorrow, because there are so many other things to do. And also because other people don't always respect your writing time, either. Your boss or your mom or your spouse expects you to be at your job every weekday at 9 am, but they don't think it's so important that you're sitting at the computer writing at 6 pm. And they'll never see how important it is unless you make it important.

That being said, sometimes life is so full of other commitments that you simply can't carve out much time to write. What I suggest is to find a set period of time every week that you can devote to writing. Maybe it's 9 to noon on Saturday mornings. Maybe it's Tuesday nights from 5 to 10. Make a bargain with your significant other, tell your friends, and don't accept social engagements for those times. Keep the time sacred, and use it to write. Now, obviously there will be days when you have to break that commitment—you have to attend a wedding, travel for work, visit someone in the hospital. But if you diligently try to make certain hours writing-only hours, you can start to develop a rhythm and accrue some pages.

The other thing that works for me is to set page goals. I usually try to write 100 to 150 pages a month. If I'm falling behind on that goal, I find myself hunting for spare hours just to make up the lost time. I admit, it's kind of an OCD-

way to live...but it works for me! But you have to pick page goals that are realistic for you, otherwise you won't even try to hit the mark. If it's 20 pages a month, it's 20 pages. That's 20 more pages than you had before.

Finally, remember that it takes a long time to write a book. Maybe Jack Kerouac wrote *On the Road* in three feverish weeks, but most people need months or years. It's easy to get discouraged, it's easy to lose interest in the book, it's easy to get distracted by a shiny new idea. But to write a book and do it well requires a real investment of time and energy, and you have to pace yourself and encourage yourself to make it through to the end.

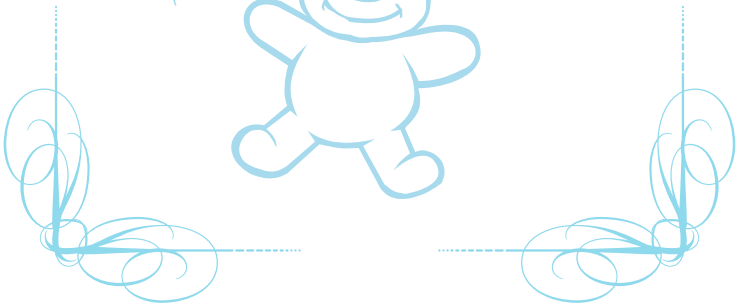




8



PARENTING





Parenting Is Not a Zero Sum Game!

From Evelyn Tsitas, an exceptionally useful [blog post about what it took for her to write her thesis:](#)

“Admit it, if you are a mother, there is always that nagging voice somewhere – yours or some critic – that says ‘intense focus and study at the expense of much of everything else in your life will be bad for your young children.’

Rubbish.

Low expectations, complacency and laziness are limiting. Constantly pushing your boundaries and challenging your comfort zone, on the other hand,*

teach children not to be limited in their aspirations while at the same time reinforcing that anything worth achieving takes hard work, and sacrifice. If you are completing your doctorate and fretting about your children taking a back seat, don't worry. The mum up late studying, turning down social invitations, spending holidays at the computer or university library may be absent from her children's lives in some ways, but she is abundantly present in ways which matter in the long term.

I can tell you first hand that far from harm my children, my back to back MA and PhD while my two sons were young gave them the gift of knowing success demands: Perseverance, commitment, focus, determination, time management, and deferred gratification.

I never volunteered to help out at their school, I refused to play the game of keeping up domestic appearances, and I rarely even went to school social events. You know what? I speak from experience here – I was raised by a mother who studied, and I have friends who completed their doctorates while their children were young. We are here to tell you the world will not end, nor will social structures collapse, if you do not help out at your child's school or

socialise with the other mothers.”

AMEN. A common thing that holds parents—and, especially, in my experience, moms—back is the zero-sum idea that their success must come at their children’s expense. But the only way to accomplish something big—whether it’s writing a thesis or book, starting a business, getting/staying in shape, or doing substantial political or community work—is to devote significant time to it. This means that, for sure, you’re going to have to stop doing some things you’re already doing, in parenting and other areas of life. (*Note: I’m not keen on using labels like “complacency” and “laziness”—disempowerment being the root cause of underproductivity—but the rest holds true.)

And you’re almost certainly going to have to stop doing some things most other parents do.

People who don’t come to terms with this reality often remain ambivalent, i.e., stuck between two seemingly-opposing goals. It’s a really unpleasant, not to mention, unproductive, place to be. And it doesn’t help if you perfectionistically constantly measure your performance against an idealized version of your role, so that it becomes a battle between your “superparent” and “superachiever” personae.

The solutions are to:

(1) **Get real about your time, energy, and other constraints.** This may involve saying goodbye to:

- A goal you really want to accomplish, only not as much as some other goals. (You can return to it later if you want.) And,
- An image of yourself as some kind of superachiever.

(It's okay, and probably a good idea, to mourn these losses.)

You do this by creating a weekly time budget and schedule to figure out how, exactly, you want to invest your precious time. (Detailed instructions in my book *The 7 Secrets of the Prolific* and here are some helpful forms you can download free.)

(2) **Stop seeing parenting as a zero-sum game.** Your kids will benefit enormously from watching you wrestle with conflicting goals, make tough choices, defend your schedule and priorities, and otherwise make the best of things in an imperfect world. Also from your modeling hard work and perseverance. As Tsitas reports:

“The past 12 months in my household have been a demanding ones, with my eldest son completing his

final year at school. And although it has been three years exactly since I graduated with my PhD, he still sees me work long into the night on my creative and academic writing, after a day of commercial writing in communications. He knows what it takes to achieve your goals.

And I have to say – he took note. We celebrated last month when his terrific exam results netted him a place in a prestigious university course and put him on track for the architecture career he aspires to....

He wasn't out at parties, he was at his desk. No pain – no gain. If there is one thing I have taught him over the years it is the success that comes from deferred gratification.

At his 18th birthday celebration, just before his last exams, he thanked me for being both supportive and a role model and showing me how it is done.”

One of my own precious childhood memories is that of the summer my father took a math course he needed for a work promotion. I particularly remember him doing his homework at our community pool, sitting quiet and focused at a shaded table while everyone around us was running around having fun in the sun. Even at age nine, I was

impressed by his dedication.

Which brings us to...

(3) **Ask Your Kid.** Even the little ones are capable of understanding this situation and supporting you. So, level with your kid: “Mom loves spending time with you, but it’s also really important that she work on her novel, and she feels bad when she doesn’t. Do you have any ideas for solving this problem?” (Also see the “Encouraging Cooperation” chapter of the parenting classic, *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*, a communications primer I recommend to everyone regardless of parental status.) Some of the best moments in my teaching career have come from people reporting the results of these kinds of discussions. One five-year-old pondered for just a moment before suggesting that she and her dad, “do our homework together.” So every evening, the two of them sat side-by-side at the dining room table, he working on his business plan and she doing her coloring, with her occasionally pausing to “check his work.”

Just be prepared for some uncomfortable truths, like when your kid reveals that, no, it’s not actually important to him that you attend his soccer practices. Or, when your kid reminds you—as the four-year-old daughter of another of my students reminded her mom when she offered to read a

second bedtime story—“Isn’t it time for you to start studying, Mommy?”

If you have thoughts or suggestions on balancing parenting with other goals, please leave them in the comments!

How to Help Your Kids Kick the Video Game Habit

I Treat Excessive Video Gaming (and TV watching, Web surfing, etc.) as a Form of Procrastination

A recent article in the New York Times cites [a 2010 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation](#) that found that a typical middle- or upper-class American child spends around 10 hours a day on video games, social networking, television, and other forms of electronic entertainment, an increase of nearly 54 percent in little more than a decade. The numbers from poor households are even worse: 11.5 hours of electronics a day, representing an increase of more than 70 percent during the same time period.

Summer is definitely a time for kicking back, but you probably don't want your kid to spend all three months glued to a screen. To ensure that he or she doesn't, try treating his desire to overindulge in electronics as a kind of procrastination.



That's what we call it, after all, when adults put off doing their important activities; and a kid who's obsessively playing video games (or watching television, etc.) can likewise be said to be putting off more meaningful and enriching activities such as sports, art, music, reading, volunteering, a job, or in-person socializing.

Many people think procrastination is caused by laziness, lack of willpower, lack of discipline, or other "lacks," but these are actually symptoms of a deeper problem: disempowerment, meaning that you are separated from, or constrained from using, your strengths, skills, talents, etc.

2 Recognize that Perfectionism is the Main Cause of Procrastination

Contrary to what many people think, perfectionism is not "having high standards," but (a) setting unreasonable or

unattainable standards, and (b) punishing yourself harshly when you fail to meet them. “If my kids aren’t getting A’s all the time, and aren’t perfectly well behaved all the time, and my house isn’t showplace-perfect all the time, then I’m a bad parent.” (“Bad parent” being the harsh self-punishment.) Or, from your kid’s standpoint, “If I don’t get into an Ivy League school, I’m a total loser.” (While an Ivy League education is certainly attainable for many kids, the sheer number of qualified applicants relative to available spaces means that many even highly qualified kids won’t be admitted.)

Perfectionism comprises many other symptoms, including:

- ***Dichotomization*** (black-and-white thinking, such as that you’re either a total success or total failure, with nothing in between);
- ***Grandiosity*** (you expect things that are difficult for other people to be easy for you);
- ***Overidentification*** with your work (so you live or die, ego-wise, based on how well you perform; this is a major source of the terror); and
- ***Labeling*** (“lazy,” “loser,” etc.).

Most of us know only one way to cope with the terror perfectionism engenders: to flee from it via procrastination. So, instead of doing our important and meaningful projects we do busy work, or overgive to others, or compulsively clean house, or...get sucked into video games, social media, and other electronic distractions.

3 A Process for Helping Your Kid Kick Perfectionism and “Unplug”

1) Obviously, **never call him (or anyone else including yourself, for that matter), “lazy,” or accuse him of being undisciplined, etc.** Not only do these labels misdiagnose the problem (which, you recall, is not laziness but terror-fueled disempowerment), they are undermining. Many of the underproductive adults I teach and coach painfully recall having been negatively labeled as children. This step alone should make a big difference not just in your being able to influence your kid, but in the general peacefulness and happiness of your home.

2) If your kid is receptive, **have a nonjudgmental conversation about what procrastination is, and the reasons**



Having fun outdoors with the Sierra Club!

people do it, and why he specifically might be doing it.

You can talk about how it's okay to spend some time on mindless or otherwise unproductive activities, but why it's dangerous to overdo it. You can also talk about:

- The unique “addictiveness” of a lot of our electronic gadgets, including the music, visuals, and intermittent rewards (like slot machines!);
- The social pressures to overuse;
- The consequences of overuse, including lassitude and loneliness; and, finally,
- You can discuss your own procrastination challenges and how they've affected you, and what you're doing to handle them. Of course, kids are very aware of our own shortcomings and apparent hypocrisies, so if you haven't mastered your own electronic addiction you're going to have a hard time convincing him to tackle his. On the other hand, this is a fantastic project for you both to work on together while providing each other with mutual support and encouragement.
- If you're lucky, your kid may acknowledge some of these points, or even add some new ones; if not, you can still state your opinions and concerns in a nonjudgmental way.

3) At the same time, **don't be afraid to set, and enforce, limits on electronics use.** "Limits are love," as the parenting books tell us; and limits, often in the form of "deadlines" and "plans," are also a classic productivity tool.

4) Don't just make suggestions for new activities: **help your kid come up with a plan—and be prepared to invest some time and money (for classes, equipment, transportation, etc.) in that plan,** if necessary. Whether it's art, science, music, sports, a job, or another endeavor, you want to make your kid's transition to it as easy and enticing as possible.

- If your kid refuses to work with you on this, don't go back on your limits but also don't make a big fuss, which would only be likely to cause him to dig in his heels. Instead, buy some enticing books, art supplies, or gear and leave them where he can find them. (But not in his room, or he'll feel pressured.) Kids are naturally curious and adventurous and if you can wait out his "detox" period, he'll hopefully try out the new stuff on his own.

5) Once you've helped your kid plan and organize his new activity, **back WAY off.** Don't judge his choices, or the results he's achieving. Keep questions to a minimum. Recall that procrastination is mainly an escape from harsh per-

fectionist judgments, so judging your kid even mildly is likely to send him fleeing back to the safety of his video game. (It's okay to offer support or advice when requested, though.)

6) Give your kid as much time and space as possible to enjoy the new activity. Note that this goal may conflict with any (perfectionist?) need you might have to control your kid's time and space. Many creative and successful adults were given plenty of time and space to explore their youthful passions, two famous examples being Bill Gates, whose parents let him spend untold hours at a local computer lab as a young teen, and the late Randy Pausch, author of The Last Lecture, whose parents let him paint his bedroom walls.



*(Pausch's advice to parents:
"If your kids want to paint their
bedroom, as a favor to me let
them do it. It'll be OK.")*

7) Acknowledge the steps your kid is taking toward spending his time productively, and also his struggle.

Don't overdo it—give him space. But once in a while let him know how proud you are that he is succeeding at a challenge that even many adults find daunting. Also, reward him whenever you think appropriate—but not with extra electronics time! And, when he's having a tough time, remind him that struggles are normal and to be expected, but don't last forever. (Don't forget to congratulate him on his commitment and tenacity!)

8) And don't forget to acknowledge and reward and support yourself, too! Helping your kid escape the shackles of an escapist habit is one of the hardest things a parent can do, but it's also one of the most impactful.

Your kid will thank you his whole (happier and more productive) life.



Nonperfectionist Parenting During a Pandemic

And so it begins. The school and work year, I mean. And this year will be unlike any year in recent memory. The situation is extreme, but I've taught productivity to many parents of young kids, and the principles stay constant. In fact, it's even more crucial to hew to them during difficult times.

Some of my favorite successes have involved parents of young kids. There was the mom of a four-year-old son who had a full-time job and was also getting a master's degree. (The mom, not the son!) Like many parents, Mom's days were devoted to work and parenting, and so it was only in the evenings that she could do her schoolwork. But her

son also wanted her attention in the evenings—and bedtime stories were an especial point of contention, with Mom trying to rush through them so she could get to her homework, and Son constantly asking for, “Just one more, Mommy!”

Then there was the dad of a six-year-old daughter. The situation was similar: he worked all day and wanted to use his evenings to plan for the business he was trying to start. But Daughter, who missed him all day, expected him to devote his evenings to her. (What made this one especially fun was that Dad was an older guy and first-time parent; he was also a big tough former military officer, but it was clear that he doted on his little girl, and she ruled him.)

Here’s the thing: kids get it. They’re empathetic and also great problem-solvers. And so, in both cases, I urged the parents to open up to their kids about their struggles, and solicit their help. And in both cases, the kid came through.

Mom told her son, “Mommy loves you and loves bedtime stories with you, but she’s also scared and upset because she needs to do her homework and doesn’t have time to do it.” Son thought for a moment and said, “How about if we just do one long story and don’t rush it?” Mom agreed, and from that point on bedtimes were much easier.

Dad had a similar discussion with his daughter, who thought for a moment and then said, “How about if we do our homework together?” And from that day forward, they both worked at the dining room table, he on his business plan, and her on her drawing and other projects.

I’m not saying this will work with all kids: just that it’s worth a try. And that, in my experience, our loved ones of all ages tend to step up more than we expect.

Some other things to remember

- **Nonperfectionism grounds everything.** Lower your standards in every area you possibly can—and then lower them some more! This year is going to be a wash for nearly everyone; and those with kids at home have it especially tough. Blame, shame, guilt, remorse, regret, etc., are always pointless, and this year more than ever.
- **It’s not zero-sum.** Many parents want to shield their kids from their own struggles. (Both from a sense of duty and because they’re embarrassed.) But opening up to them, and letting them watch, and help, as you navigate your perfectionism, time crunch, and other difficult challenges, is a real gift. You will be modeling

some very deep wisdom, and they will carry that wisdom with them throughout the rest of their lives.

- **Get clear on your own motives.** A coda to the mom story: one night, after the bedtime situation was resolved, she offered to read her son a second story. As she reported the next day in class, to general amusement: “He looked me right in the eye and said, ‘Aren’t you supposed to be doing your homework, Mommy?’” It’s an amazing, if unsettling, thing when our kids turn the tables and help us maintain our limits and boundaries. During the class discussion, Mom said that she now realized that she sometimes used the bedtime stories to procrastinate on her own school work!

One of the pernicious things about procrastination is that it often involves both a “push” away from your work and a “pull” towards someone else’s agenda. You need to identify, and deal with, both forces.

- **Be resourceful.** I know that many, many people are struggling right now. But I also know that many people who have financial and other resources are sometimes reluctant to use them to buy ease and time for themselves. If you do have the funds to buy a better computer, office furniture, lighting, etc., this would be a good time to use them. Or, to the extent that you feel

safe doing so, use them to pay for services (e.g., laundry service and meal deliveries) that help you reclaim some of your precious time.

Also remember that...

- **Time management is your friend.** It's both liberating, and grounding. So, go ahead and create a time budget and schedule; then track your time for at least a couple of weeks to help you get used to them. Creating the budget forces you to confront your time, energy, and other constraints. That's painful—and you should definitely take some time to grieve the inevitable tough choices and compromises. But if you don't do your time management there's a good chance you're evading those essential decisions, and that can be far worse. (If not in the short term, then the long term.)
- Remember that a key to time management success is not to have too many activities to manage. (The goal isn't to jam your schedule full, but empty it out so that you have abundant time—or, as abundant as possible—for the essentials.) So anything you're doing that is inessential should be canceled, and anything that can be postponed till easier times should be.

- The goal is empowerment, which translates to having as many good options for yourself (and your kids) as possible, given the circumstances. **If you find yourself stuck between two equally-unappealing options, or anticipating two equally-unappealing outcomes, do your best to find some alternatives.** This may well be harder than usual, or even impossible, due to the pandemic, but at least give it a try. And since we often can't see our way out of the corners we've painted ourselves into, this is definitely a situation where it pays to talk with someone else. Speaking of which...
- **Solve problems in community.** Yes, you may be socially distancing, but you're probably still in touch with plenty of other parents online. Try being candid about a problem that's bedeviling you and asking for help. Many of us like to put on a happy face despite whatever bad stuff is happening, but now's the time to try breaking this habit. Often when we do this, it's an enormous relief—because keeping secrets is exhausting—and we get some great advice and support and help others. That's a lot of positive outcomes from the simple act of sharing.
- Obviously, use your own judgment as to what you're comfortable sharing and not sharing. And if you're not comfortable posting something publicly, you can email

or call a sympathetic fellow parent instead. (Although remember that even private emails can, and often do, wind up being made public.)

- **Always answer your rhetorical questions.** Like, for instance, “Why can’t I concentrate?” Or, “Why am I so tired all the time?” Journal out a list of reasons—there will be multiple reasons, I promise—taking your time so that you get a complete list. (And don’t omit the “small” reasons, which: (a) are probably bigger than they seem, and (b) add up.) Oh, and skip the whole, “I’m lazy, I’m disorganized,” shame and blame game. That won’t help.
- I’m guessing that just writing down the list will be healing. After you’re done, start working on solutions. Some will be easy to implement, others harder. Some problems you may not be able to solve at all. But solve what you can, when you can. Even seemingly small acts of problem-solving can have an outsize impact.

Finally, throughout this and all difficult time, be sure to **double-down on the self-compassion, self-forgiveness, and self-care.** We all need this, and your kids will also benefit from seeing you prioritize it. A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself, “What would I tell someone else who was having this problem?” The truth is, many of us treat oth-

ers with far more compassion and kindness than we treat ourselves. (It's called "perfectionism." [LINK](#)) That may feel selfless but it is both inhumane and a dead end. We are not "perpetual emotion" machines who can eternally give while getting little kindness or support in return.

This bottom line is non-negotiable: you need to treat yourself with at least as much compassion and kindness and patience as you would anyone else.

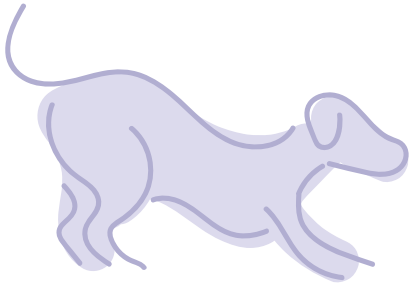
Good luck!





DOGS





Dogs Don't Like Perfectionism Either!

This piece by Nancy Tanner on how impatience ruins dog training is brilliant:

When I am asked what is the biggest problem I see in dog training today, it is the same problem I saw fourteen years ago, and thirty years ago, it is the misunderstanding of time.

- It takes time to learn how to be a teacher to another species.
- It takes time to learn how to learn from another species.
- It takes time to build understanding.
- It takes time to learn how to observe and how to apply what you observe.
- It takes time to build a relationship with trust.



Dogs are naturally non-perfectionist! Note how Billy takes his time with the crucial task of preparing this peanut butter jar for recycling.

It's not just dog training! Ask teachers of any craft or skill what their #1 challenge is with students, and the answer will inevitably be, "getting them to slow down." While (speaking generally) you want to do your work at a steady clip and not get bogged down on any one detail, you also don't want to rush through the important details—and they can take way longer to get right than many of us think (or want).

Even now, after decades of serious writing, I'm constantly amazed at how long it takes to do quality work. The other morning, two brief thank you notes took an hour. A blog post even on a subject I know well—like this one!—can take many hours.

Perfectionists, however, are impatient. They need their success NOW because they overidentify with their work,

and their self-esteem rises and falls based on how well they think they've done.

Perfectionists also grandiosely expect their work to go easily—even work others struggle with. And they expect to soar effortlessly past all barriers and challenges. This causes them to skimp on planning and preparation, as well as on the details of the work itself.

All of which leads to bad outcomes.

Unfortunately, perfectionist narratives—including those of the superfast or supereasy success—abound, especially in our media. We're constantly being told about youthful or overnight successes in business, the arts, activism, and other realms. (Including dog training!) These stories inevitably omit crucial information such as the person's wealth or connections, or the twenty years they spent working toward their "overnight" success, or the fact that for every dog who is "easily" trainable, there are others—and perhaps many others—who require more time and patience.

All perfectionist narratives are lies.

Meanwhile, when we encounter a truly NONperfectionist narrative or piece of advice, we should cherish it like the true golden wisdom it is. Which brings us back to Tanner:



You cannot rush a relationship.

You cannot rush the teaching or learning process, on either end of the leash.

You cannot rush maturity or the lack there of.

You cannot rush your skills, or your dog's understanding of your skills.

My advice to new dog owners, seasoned dog owners, and want to be dog owners – learn how to settle in, learn that nothing will happen overnight. Learn that if you try to take short cuts and try to make it all happen to fit your schedule, or your desires, or your needs, it will come back to bite you in the ass, figuratively or literally.

Thankfully, most of us don't have to worry about being bitten in the course of doing our work! But once you understand that perfectionism never helps—that it's always a dead end, and apparently not just for our species—you've taken an important step on the road toward joyful productivity.

Furball Friday: Billy's Studio Shots

So, we hired a professional photographer to capture Billy in all his furball glory. I've hired a pro for my business, but never personally. The things we do for our dogs!

It was a bit of a splurge – \$250 for everything including some prints – but worth every dime. Not only are the pictures amazing, but it was amazing watching her work. She held a can of dog food in front of Billy and let him lick it every once in a while. It was pure intermittent reinforcement like slot machines do, and it drove him into a frenzy. He had to pose at different angles to get his licks in, and she just snapped him a zillion times while he was posing.

Below are some of the shots. Thank you Susan Sabo of Fresh Simple True (who also does a lot of pro bono work to help shelter dogs get adopted) for the amazing work!



First, Billy captured in all his awesome adorableness!



In this shot, he NOSE what's going on!



And here he is looking like Rocket Raccoon!



DOGS

Homage to Rosie and Cinnamon

One of the events that most moved me over the past year was the tragic and joyful life and death of Rosie the Chihuahua.

Rosie was the victim of a backyard breeder/hoarder who made money selling puppies, including from fashionable “designer” breeds. In their quest to create “teacups,” “merles,” and other designer dogs, many such breeders wind up with deformed and chronically ill dogs in their litters, and Rose was one of those. Along with her shockingly deformed muzzle, she also suffered from mange-induced fur loss, immune suppression, scoliosis, and fused leg bones. (Some of these conditions were from lack of

care rather than genetics.) Looking at her picture, you can't even recognize her as a chihuahua.

Rosie grew up in a crowded, chaotic house with more than 40 dogs, where, despite her serious health problems, she never once saw a veterinarian. Who knows what successes of intelligence, insight, perseverance, resourcefulness, and plain old toughness she had to accrue just to survive?

Eventually, Rosie was rescued, and a wonderful woman named Cinnamon Muhlbauer adopted her.

She cherished Rosie, bought her toys, dressed her in fancy clothes, and took her outside to experience sunshine and breezes. She also told Rosie's story, again and again, so that others would learn never to shop from a "backyard breeder," "Craigslist breeder," or pet shop (many of whom acquire their puppies and kittens from backyard breeders). In the process, Rosie acquired a spectacular website and a Facebook page with more than 189,000 Friends.

You probably already know that I'm a crazy-passionate dog lover who would gladly adopt every dog in the world if she could, but I have to confess that adopting such a weird looking, unhealthy little dog as Rosie, not to mention be-

ing so public about having done so, would have given me pause. I credit Cinnamon with enormous successes of individuality, compassion, love, vision, and effectiveness.

In October, Rosie's many health problems finally caught up with her, and she died suddenly and unexpectedly of pneumonia, at less than three years of age.

Cinnamon is grieving, and many people who don't know her and Rosie, myself included, have grieved with her.

Part of me is reluctant to share Rosie's story and my feelings about her.

Is she really so important in the wide scheme of things? Are Cinnamon, I, and the hundreds of thousands of other Rosie fans out there merely "crazy animal people?" Aren't there plenty of humans out there more deserving of caring and compassion?

These are valid questions, and here are my thoughts on them:



Whatever the world suffers from, it is not too much compassion and caring. And whatever it is that allows hundreds of thousands of strangers to rally around a helpless and abused little dog must be part of the solution.

Martin Luther King, Jr., famously said that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” and so surely he would have approved. (And perhaps at least partly for that reason his widow Coretta Scott King went vegan in the last decade of her life.)

I hope everyone reading this works to increase their compassion and consideration for the humans and nonhumans in the world around them. I hope more people open their hearts to worthy souls like Rosie, and more animal lovers (and we are legion) open their hearts to the many “non-pet” farmed animals who lead lives far more miserable even than Rosie’s early life.

I’ll leave you with two of my favorite quotes.

First, James Herriot, author of the All Creatures Great and Small:

“

I had often thought when I encountered cruelty and neglect that there was a whole army of peo-

ple who did these unspeakable things, a great, unheeding horde who never spared a thought for the feelings of the helpless creatures who depended on them. It was frightening in a way, but thank heavens there was another army ranged on the other side, an army who fought for the animals with everything they had – with their energy, their time, their money.”

Then, George Eliot, from Middlemarch:

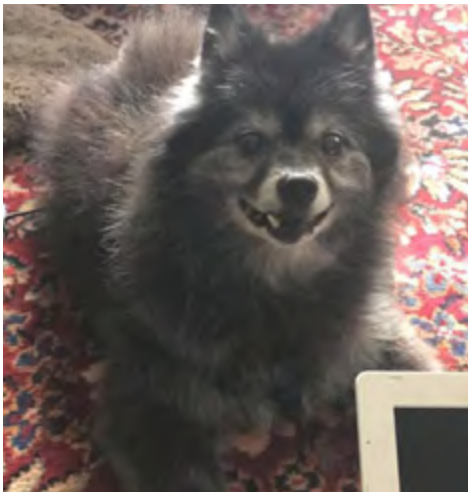
“ But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

Here’s to a successful, and more compassionate, 2014 for us all.

RIP Billy Dawg 2003? – 2019

W

e lost our cherished Billy Dawg last week. He died at home, surrounded by love.



Here is a picture his dogsitter sent us.

She captioned it: “Here he is motivating me to complete my senior project!” (Like mom, like pup!)

Billy was (we think) at least sixteen years old with some

of the usual senior dog issues, but when the end came, it was pretty sudden and unexpected. He deteriorated **very** rapidly over his last three days, and the whole experience was, as you can imagine, intense and mostly awful.

But there was one incredible moment:

Contrary to the above image of Billy adoring his dogsitter, he generally didn't shower you with affection. He kept a bit of distance, played it a bit cool. But on Saturday night, in the midst of a terrible weekend during which he was mostly "out of it," he suddenly pulled himself together, got very focused, and gave my partner (the true center of his universe) a look of the purest, most intense, and most melting love.

It was as if Billy knew his time were running out and that he had to speak his heart while he still could.

The look lasted for two or three incredible seconds, after which Billy collapsed again—and my partner and I turned to each other and said, simultaneously and in mutual wonder, "You saw that, right?"

Rest in peace sweet Billy. You were a vivid soul who knew his own mind; and, despite your determined efforts to

play the tough guy, you were relentlessly adorable. We were privileged to share your love and company for six years; and I wish, with all my heart, that it could have been longer.





PERSONAL





In Which I Advise a Baby

My friend, free software activist, Ciaran McHale and his wife, Bianca, recently had a baby—the gorgeous Toby. And they did something completely cool, which was to ask friends concerned with social justice to write letters to Toby, which they would publish in a book.

The book *Letters to Toby* is out, and you can read it [here](#).

It's full of inspiration and insight, so check it out! By the way, Ciaran compiled it using his program, Canthology, which anyone interested in producing anthologies should check out.

Letters to Toby



Below is my letter to Toby, which I hope you enjoy.

Hillary

Dear Toby,

Greetings from Boston, MA, and welcome to the world! Your parents have asked me to write a letter to you on the momentous occasion of your birth.

I don't know your father very well, but he is a very special person to me. After my first book, *The Lifelong Activist*, was published, he wrote to me saying that he liked it and also included a detailed list of grammatical and other errors he had spotted to help me with my second edition. It was a generous gift of his time. And when I published my second book, *The 7 Secrets of the Prolific*, your father was the very first person to order it— just a few moments after I sent out the announcement! True, he was on British time, and thus had a head start on the Americans who were still asleep. But it was still a very meaningful and encouraging thing he did.

So I know your father to be very intelligent and caring. And although I don't know your mother at all, I'm sure she is an equally special person. And this project they came up with of having friends write you a letter may be the most wonderful way possible to welcome any child into the world. Already so many people know you and care about you!

I think it's appropriate that I share with you some of the important things I've learned during my own years on the planet. I have had a pretty diverse career, with some ups and some downs, and my personal life has also had its ups and downs. However, I find myself, at age 53, in a very satisfying place. In particular, my professional life is very gratifying. I help people overcome procrastination, underproductivity and underperformance. It is a relatively unusual specialty, and a very important one, and I am very good at it. It is also immensely illuminating.

The most important thing I have learned is that underproductivity or underachievement always have a cause (or causes), and the cause is always valid. Always. 100%. No exceptions. Sooner or later, you will be underproductive or will otherwise disappoint yourself—it happens to all of us. An important key to being happy, effective, and successful is that, when

that happens, you not waste time bashing yourself or putting yourself down. Just work on characterizing and resolving the root problems, and things will clear up probably more quickly than you can imagine.

Try not to do this important work alone, but in the company of smart and compassionate friends, family and other supporters. And be there for them, not just because it's the right thing to do, but because helping others is the best way to foster your own growth and healing.

Beyond that, the two values that I most commend to you are generosity and compassion.

Generosity feels wonderful, and of course it does wonderful things for others. In my life I've given away lots of free advice and help, and lots of money to individuals and causes. I've also given away my home (to foster children and foster animals), and a kidney. (Your Dad suggested that I send my article on that experience as this letter, but I trust in the enduring power of the Internet— as well as your own inquisitiveness — and believe that, when you're ready to read the article, it will be out there and you'll be able to find it easily.) I've also given away lots of love. Often that love was returned, but sometimes it wasn't, which was painful. But as Billy Joel sings in The Long-

est Time, “I have been a fool for lesser things.” I believe it is always worth taking a chance for love.

I see people who are not generous and their lives seem, to me, to be cramped and constrained. They’re always weighing and measuring— money, time, favors, feelings— and they’re also always hoarding (the same). The result may be relatively comfortable and safe, and possibly even happy to a degree, but they are capable of so much more— and in many cases they know it and are bitter.

As for compassion... the Greek philosopher Philo of Alexandria famously said, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” And Graham Greene, in one of his novels, says that everyone is less happy than he or she seems. The biggest impact you can have is to be compassionate on as wide a scale as possible— and I beg you not to forget the non-human animals in your efforts. **Unfortunately, we are all victimized by the reality that we must compete for scarce resources and otherwise live at each other’s expense. In light of all that, I believe humanity’s greatest achievements will be veganism and the related ethics of ahimsa (doing no harm) and nonviolence. I urge you to explore all of these and adopt them as your personal credo.**

Also, in your life, demand generosity and compassion from those around you, and never settle for anything less.

It's an amazing thing your Dad did, to generously and compassionately put in time to help me improve my books when he didn't know me at all. It was also incredible of your parents to ask me to participate in this most meaningful event in their lives. As a result of their generosity and compassion, I feel a connection with you right now. It may be that, as you grow up, you will want to reach out to me. I urge you to do so, because I will be here for you.

Yours in peace, love, and freedom,

Hillary Rettig



Live From Kalamazoo: A New Shot at Love



little over a year ago, I was invited to write a letter to a newborn baby, Toby.

In it, I wrote about the benefits of being generous, and in particular generous in love:

“I’ve also given away lots of love. Often that love was returned, but sometimes it wasn’t, which was painful. But as Billy Joel sings in *The Longest Time*, ‘I have been a fool for lesser things.’ I believe it is always worth taking a chance for love.”

I remember hesitating after writing that: would I come

across as pathetic or needy? Was the Billy Joel reference too common? (Maybe I should have quoted someone more “intellectually impressive”?)

But I went with it, and was glad I did. Honesty and boldness are their own rewards, since they help you overcome shame and feel more secure in your own skin. And I did get a couple of emails from people who said my email inspired them to take some risks in love.

Here’s the incredible thing, though...

Not two weeks after writing that letter, in the kind of coincidence you would scorn if you saw it in a book or movie, I re-met a man I dated thirty years ago (when I was 19!), and we became a fast couple. Jan was newly single after a 27-year marriage, and had come to Boston on sabbatical. We hadn’t been in touch at all during those thirty years, save for a couple of emails after each of my books was published. But we were able to pick up immediately from where we left off, and it was great!

Because my work is portable and his isn’t—he’s a physics professor at Kalamazoo College—and because being in a relationship is important to me, it was a given from the

beginning that I would move to Kalamazoo if things worked out. (The word Kalamazoo, by the way, derives from the Potawatomi for “boiling waters,” a reference to the fast-moving Kalamazoo River. However, I tell Easterners it actually translates to “twice the real estate at half the price.”)



And so, here I am! In a new living situation in a new city, in a new part of the country; buying new furniture with a new partner. It’s not really the thing you’re “supposed” to be doing at age 54: you’re supposed to be more settled. And it’s not always easy. But I’m beyond grateful to be facing this particular set of challenges. I know many people who are facing, or have faced, much worse, including my parents, who were settled in their fifties, but in the most miserable way.

Happy to be “Happy Enough”

It’s funny: I’ve been thinking about this newsletter for months, and have written it in my head probably a dozen times. I’ve always imagined it to be a cheerful and upbeat

missive. But now that I'm actually in Kalamazoo and writing it, I feel more reflective, and even humble. I'm aware that I lucked out spectacularly with Jan—and being the beneficiary of great luck is humbling.

For another, love now seems a more complex phenomenon than it did when I was younger. Like everyone else our age, Jan and I have complicated pasts, and we carry those pasts with us into the future.



Finally, even though we hope our future will be glorious, we obviously can't predict anything. At our stage of life, we can reasonably expect, at the very least, some health challenges. So happily-ever-after is even more a reductive, perfectionist myth at this age than it was when I was younger.

But we can be happy enough: and that, in itself, is worth the struggle.

I will leave you, optimistically, with the great George Eliot (from Adam Bede):



How is it that the poets have said so many fine things about our first love, so few about our later love? Are their first poems their best? Or are not those the best which come from their fuller thought, their larger experience, their deeper-rooted affections? The boy's flute-like voice has its own spring charm; but the man should yield a richer, deeper music."



My Dad's Finest Hour

My Dad's finest hour may have been during the famous U.S. Postal Workers Strike of 1970. [Per Wikipedia:](#)

"At the time, postal workers were not permitted by law to engage in collective bargaining. Striking postal workers felt wages were very low, benefits poor and working conditions unhealthy and unsafe. APWU president Moe Biller described Manhattan post offices as like "dungeons," dirty, stifling, too hot in summer, and too cold in winter....An immediate trigger for the strike was a Congressional decision to raise the wages of postal workers by only 4%, at the same time as Congress raised its own wages by 41%."

And from the Website of the New York Letter Carriers Union Branch 36:

“Every revolution has its triggering events, and for the 1970 postal strike it was the courageous actions of a small group of Bronx letter carriers....The actions of the Bronx carriers had instilled a sense of euphoria among many New York carriers...for it became clear that if thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of postal employees could only show the same sense of courage and solidarity that the Bronx carriers had demonstrated, then throughout the country true power would rest in the hands of postal employees.”

My Dad played a small role in all this.

According to my mom, he was in management, by then, so no longer part of the union. He was under strict orders, that wintry March, to keep the doors of the massive Bronx General Post Office building locked against the strikers. But he disobeyed, at some risk to his job, and unlocked a door so that the strikers could come in and warm up and use the bathrooms.



The strike succeeded, and postal workers won the right to unionize. As a result, according to the NYLCU-36 narrative:

“Literally millions of workers employed by the Postal Service during the past 35 years have been the beneficiaries of wages, benefits and working conditions far superior to what they otherwise would have been.”

George Eliot’s encomium to Dorothea, the activist heroine of her great novel Middlemarch, seem apt:



But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

Missing you, Dad, and trying to live the life you would have wanted for me.

My Big Fat Vegan Kidney Donation

“ I had often thought when I encountered cruelty and neglect that there was a whole army of people who did these unspeakable things, a great, unheeding horde who never spared a thought for the feelings of the helpless creatures who depended on them. It was frightening in a way, but thank heavens there was another army ranged on the other side, an army who fought for the animals with everything they had – with their energy, their time, their money.” – James Herriot

What's the awesomest gift you can give someone? Their life back, right?

That's what I had been thinking for a while. And so, I had been looking into donating a kidney. From my research I knew that the surgery was really safe (only 2/10,000 fatality rate, lower than for appendectomies), and that you can survive perfectly well with just one kidney. Really what you're looking at is a bit of inconvenience in exchange for... saving someone's life.

Sign me up!

My research eventually led me to a popular site called matchingdonors.com, and even though I knew what I was going to find there, I was NOT prepared. It's like a dating site, except the personal ads are all from people begging you to save their lives by giving them a kidney. So it's full of messages like:

"I'm 40 years old and want to live to see my kids grow up."

"I'm 60 years old and hoping to live to attend my grandson's graduation."

"I'm 25 years old and just want the chance to live a normal life."

Heartbreaking doesn't begin to describe it. Most of these

people were on dialysis, where, three times a week, you sit for hours hooked up to a machine that does the kidney-work of filtering out waste from your blood. Dialysis is, at best, a mixed blessing: it keeps you alive, but totally screws up your life and doesn't even work all that well. Most dialysis patients are weak and sick all the time, and die within a few short years.

Once I saw the matching donors ads, I knew I would have to donate – how can you turn someone away when you've seen their face and heard their desperate story? In fact, I wished I had a thousand extra kidneys to donate. But I only had one, so how to choose?

Lots of the people self-identified as animal lovers, with some including photos of themselves with their companion animals in their ads. As a vegan and animal/veg activist I knew I would definitely want to donate to one of them. And then I came across an ad without a picture that included this text:



I am a retired Veterinarian from Colorado. My wife and I started a no-kill animal shelter 20 years ago to give animals a second chance at life. I would like a second chance too. We have invested everything to help save the animals.”

My kidney starting singing sweet songs of love, having found its dream recipient. His name is Bill Suro, and the shelter he and his wife Nanci started in Denver is called MaxFund. They save sweeties like Millie, a dog who was found in New Mexico with anemia, a fused spine, grossly infected back feet, and (rage alert) BB shots embedded throughout her body. Many shelters would have euthanized her, but at Maxfund she got all the medical help she needed and is now whizzing around in a rollie cart!

So I called Bill and offered to donate. Then came a months-long battery of medical tests, including the ever-popular 24-hour urine collection, in which you get to pee into a giant bottle and then hand it over to some lucky nurse. Then we had some vegan drama: some of my urine levels were low according to the standards of traditional medicine. Dr. John J. Pippin from the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine to the rescue! He wrote a note to me, which I forwarded to the transplant center, explaining, "Since many vegans have lower (healthier) protein intake than omnivores, and NO animal protein intake, their GFRs [glomerular filtration rates, y'all-HR] will often be lower... vegetarian and vegan diets actually improve kidney function for patients with kidney disease."

In November, I flew from Boston to the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta, where the transplant would take

place. There, I met Bill and Nanci in person for the first time, which, as you can imagine, was intense. They were filled with gratitude and amazement bordering on shock, since only about a 100 people a year get a kidney donated by a stranger. So, for them, this was like winning some kind of super-lottery. I understood their gratitude but felt uncomfortable over it. For me, the donation really was an inconvenience as opposed to a major sacrifice – I honestly don't know why more people don't do it. Besides, I am profoundly grateful for their twenty years' commitment to helping animals, which seems like a much bigger deal.

The operation – in which the surgeon laparoscopically “popped” out my kidney through a small incision – was a snap. (I have a 1.5” scar above my navel, and 2 tiny satellite scars where they inserted the lights-and-camera action.) Afterwards, I was on an epidural for a day but after that never took any pain meds at all.

The main downside was a few weeks of inconvenience, as I mentioned earlier. Even though the surgery was minimally invasive, it does take time to recover. I needed to get a lot of rest and not lift heavy stuff for a while.

Healthwise, the main risk for the donor is hypertension, and the doctors also warn you against eating too much protein, which can strain the remaining kidney. Given that

both conditions correlate with meat-eating – no problemo! Oh, and you’re limited to one alcoholic drink a day, which I guess for some people could be a hardship; and they also warn you against activities like contact sports that could damage the remaining kidney. (If I ever need a kidney myself, by the way, I move to the top of the wait list.)

I lost some income due to down time. But there were no medical or out-of-pocket expenses for me, as the recipient and his insurance pays for everything.

And Bill? The minute my kidney was in him, I am told, it started producing urine like a champ – and although the surgery and recovery are a lot harder for the recipient than the donor, he’s doing great. He recently wrote me that, “a bad day now is still better than a good day on dialysis.”

A lot of people look at you weird when you tell them you’re donating a kidney to a non-family member, just as they look at you weird when you tell them you’re vegan. In this society, unfortunately, you can ruin countless people’s lives running a corrupt investment fund and still meet with more social approval than if you try to lead a life of nonviolence and altruism. But we’re all working on that, right? So, just like with the veganism, I shout the donation out loud and proud.

I anticipated feeling great about having donated – and I do. (Research has shown that donors experience an uptick in self-esteem.) What I didn't anticipate was that I would now have these two amazing people, Bill and Nanci, in my life. They have really taken pains to grow the connection, sending me letters, cards, local newspapers and even cherished family photos. What a gift. (And let me acknowledge the others whose love and support made the donation possible – especially my friend Deb, who, when I told her what I was doing, immediately volunteered to watch my dogs for weeks while I was away.)

As veg*ns, we all know that there is nothing more wonderful than saving a sweet life. At the same time, I know that not everyone's going to sign up to donate. If you're one who might, that would be an amazing thing – and [email me](#) for info or support, if you'd like. In the U.S. alone, more than 6,000 people every year, or around 1 every 90 minutes, dies waiting for a kidney.

And if you can't donate your kidney, at least donate some cash to [Maxfund!](#)

Sometimes, I find myself wondering what my kidney is up to at the moment. "I wonder if it's walking by the pond." "I wonder if it's working at the vet clinic." "I wonder if it's watching bad tv." I guess I've come to think of it as be-

ing like a dog I gave up for adoption. I don't wonder if it's happy, though, because I know that if any kidney is happy, mine is – having found its “Mr. Right,” an amazing being who shares its values and is committed to helping keep other amazing beings alive and happy.

Update: The above article was written in late 2009. I'm happy to report that at least one other person (another vegan) has donated a kidney as a direct result of reading it. I've also heard from many people who are donating to friends and family members that my article has helped encourage them, and ease their worries.
