Lesson Two - What Setting Goals Really Means

Good day everyone. Welcome to Lesson Two. Today we are going to talk about goals, combining tasks in big ways WITHOUT multitasking, and some of the mental aspects of making changes and managing your time in a way that is more goal and project oriented.

The main effort of arranging your life should be to progressively reduce the amount of time required to decently maintain yourself. - Norman Rush

What Mr. Rush says applies here in that the goal is to streamline and combine as many processes as possible so that projects can be completed and progress on spectrum goals can be made more quickly. Again, without multitasking. Before we start I want to remind everyone that goals are very personal and should be based on what you want, need and can do. NOT what someone else thinks you should be doing or what everyone else does. What has been right for me has very seldom been what is right for many others. Don't let yourself get discouraged before you even start because you aren't sitting down and writing 5K words every day. Don't let vague "you should's" from other authors become something you think you must do. Evaluate *your* desires, projects, sustainable habits, and abilities and go from there. It took me far longer than it should have to realize only I could set a plan, follow it, and eventually be successful at what I wanted to do deep in my little writer's heart. Mainly because when it comes down to it if you don't like it, believe in it, and want it more than most other things it won't stick, period.

There are some concepts you need to be aware of going into our discussion about goals. There is something called the **Cone of Uncertainty**. This concept breaks down to us not being able to know everything about every step of every process. There is a point where researching the process becomes a crutch and a hindrance, and you should move forward with what you know and do the thing. For us that is sitting down and actually trying to write the words, edit the words, or do the actual book, nothing else and it is hard and scary sometimes. You are putting yourself out there with all your guard down and that is no joke.

Sometimes that point where you start to over think versus being prepared can be a bit illusive. For me, I love to delve into things and learn them front to back so I can do them when the time comes. I have to watch myself that I don't get lost down the research rabbit hole when it comes to planning. An example of how I do this is by *making* myself skip information *I have read or watched before*. If I find a really good book or article on something, like how to pitch, I like to read every single word the article has to say. I am interested in the topic so I *want* to read it all. What I *do* is scan for new information and only read things I haven't seen before. It is not comfortable and the thorough researcher in me detests the practice, but I do it, and I save time avoiding repeat material so I can stay on track.

The take away point…learn all you can and when you think you have a comfortable enough grasp to accomplish the task properly (*not perfectly*) you need to move on to the next step.

The issue: I set goals but I never actually get around to doing anything about them.

In the beginning, I was an avid professional procrastinator. So, as is my way, I decided to read up and watch some seminars on YouTube to try to improve. The Piers Steel University in Calgary

did an actual study to find out why people procrastinate. They talked about the four reasons people put things off. This study resonated with me more than any of the others, so it is the one I will share.

PSUC said there are four pillars of procrastination and I agree.

The first is **low task value**. That is when you continually put off a task because you don't assign a high value to it. This can be intentional or not. The way I fight this is to change the way I planned to accomplish the task, ask someone to help me do it or hold me accountable, or find a way to make myself accountable (if I need to finish a blurb, polish a chapter, etc., I plan to enter a contest close to the deadline I want it done by and set the money aside to do it. If I enter, the money goes to the contest, if I don't, I make myself donate that contest fee to feed kids in Africa with a cow {not kidding, here is the site: http://www.heifer.org/gift-catalog/index.html}). Not that I am against feeding kids in Africa, but I want to be a writer more. I essentially blackmail myself into it, which is FINE. Either way, someone wins, these days it is usually me, but I admit to buying more than my fair share of chickens that first year when I was trying to break those habits. It's also a charity so yay tax deduction!

A good way to track this is when you put something on your daily list put a number beside it to show how many days you have pushed it to the next day. It will become obvious after a few days what gets pushed. Once you know what keeps getting passed over you can look at it and figure out why. Either it doesn't really need to be done in the first place, you need to break it down differently, or there is something holding you back from doing it. For me it is often something I want done that someone else should actually be doing so I avoid the conflict and just do it (gives spouse side eye for not emptying dishwasher but I am grossed out by dirty dishes so I do it anyway). This is something I still fail at. It is really hard for me to push grown people to do things they should be doing. When I say should I mean they have agreed to do it or if it is work it is in their job description. Be careful not to assume just because you would do something some way someone else would, there may be conversations to have or you may need to realize that part of the process is really none of your business and mind your own tasks. Figure it out, get it done (or dismiss it), look to your business instead if that's the case, and move on.

The second pillar is **personality**. You have to find a way to work that makes you happy (eventually). No shortcuts. No cheating.

If you:

Feel overwhelmed even after you start making the progress you are trying to make

Feel guilty and too tired to get any joy out of what you are doing

Are just sort of doing things on autopilot and never feeling any excitement at all about what you are doing

You should either change your goal or project, or change how you are going about it, because even though things are hard sometimes, there should be at least a little bit of joy and excitement, even if it comes in the form of relief from time to time. In short, you have to want it. We will talk

more about that later. You have to really really want whatever it is, we will talk about the beauty pageant concept later in the class to clarify how to determine what you really want.

The third pillar is **expectations**. I have learned to beat this by making sure when I come to actually DOING the task I have researched enough about it that the task won't be all that hard for me format wise. The creativity may take a few tries to get it right but the overall how is normally not completely unfamiliar. I am essentially tricking myself into being confident and thinking all my tasks are easy because I take the time to prepare and know what I need to do beforehand. Because of how I schedule (and back plan in just a little extra time), I have enough of a buffer time-wise that I can be patient and fix things if I don't do something right the first time. That little bit of planned buffer in the event of a mistake is one of the biggest reasons I am able to stick to my calendars and long range planning.

The fourth pillar of procrastination is **goal failure**. If you set goals or plan projects that are too big or not broken down into small enough tasks to work in *your* daily schedule failing to meet those goals will eventually discourage you and the project does not advance. If you make a conscious effort to break things down into chunks you can realistically complete, after a week or two (which will take some effort, don't kid yourself) you will most likely get a good feel for what your comfortable size job is. If you are one of those folks who likes to write down a big task and are ok with only getting it mostly done STOP. If you are one of those folks who adds tomorrows things to today's list if you get done STOP. I had a big problem with ever convincing myself it was OK to be done for the day. I have noticed this in particular with other mom/care giver types. Watch for it, you will run yourself into the ground. You need to find a way to be done at the end of the day and give yourself just a few minutes, even just ten minutes to collect yourself and breathe. You also need to be able to clear your mental desktop enough to sleep properly. I teach an entire class on that, it is life changing to be able to shut down your "day brain" enough for your "night brain" to do what it is supposed to do. Finding a stopping point is crucial, especially for creatives.

After you get a little better at gauging your abilities and how much steam you have to work with in a day you may notice you can look at your schedule at the end of the day and have a pretty good idea how you are going to feel the next day going through things. If I am headed to bed on time and have not had too hard (emotionally draining) a day I will typically load the next day's schedule a little heavy. If I am wiped out from traffic, kid drama, housework, etc. I will try to schedule myself a bit lighter the following day. Keeping how I feel in mind as I plan has equated to me completing my tasks much more often than not, better sleep, less crap eating, and more overall productivity almost every single time.

A quick note before we leave off of procrastination. Another thing the PSU study covered extensively is that fear of failure causes many people to not start at all. To beat the failure to launch on doing my daily writing in particular, I have a two minute rule. I keep a timer by my computer. It is a little digital WalMart kitchen timer that cost about six dollars, nothing expensive or special. I don't use my phone because if I have it in front of me I will play with it. Put the phone OUT OF REACH, out of the room is better, but out of reach and out of sight will do. Seriously, turn off all the notifications, bings, pings, lights. Put it in a box on the shelf beside

you if you need to but get it out of your orbit. This is still hard for me. If the kid is out somewhere I simply can't but if she is in the house and safe it goes in this nice pretty box I have on my shelf just for it.

If I have a task I just can't seem to get going on once the phone is out of sight I set the timer for two minutes and whatever that task is I start and go at it full tilt for two minutes. If when the timer goes off it is still like pulling mental teeth I stop and move it to the next day or try again later that day. More often than not, I am into the task by then and well on the way to completing it or in the groove of doing it. Most of us can convince ourselves to do plenty of things for just two minutes, especially if we give ourselves permission to stop if we are still struggling. For me, tricking myself into thinking I have a choice, and that I control of whether or not to do the task helps me get it done. And as I said, since I am in control of the situation and it is no longer a drag of a task I simply can't avoid, I most often finish the task in that sitting.

Let's get real.

The first thing to remember is making any sort of meaningful changes take *time*. Research shows changing a habit or engrained thought process takes about 60 days. Interested in the science of that? Here is an article that summarizes it in fairly understandable terms: http://www.slate.com/blogs/quora/2013/05/06/does_it_really_take_21_days_to_break_a_habit.html. So, if you are going to change how you go about things, give it time to work. You are not going to break a major habit or build a major new one in a day in most cases. I put it in my calendar every ten days that whatever it is, is a work in progress for two months. That may sound silly, but when I started overhauling things I annotated things by week so I knew at the end of six to eight weeks if it was a good fix or not. I would write "Week two, call mom at least every Wednesday and Sunday". By week six, if it still wasn't working and I was missing calls on those days for some reason I tried something else. Then it was another six weeks. This is where I learned patience in tweaking my processes and eventually found things that worked very well for me long term. THOSE things are what stuck and the things that have made the difference.

The biggest problem I see with my peers and clients and their goals is they get impatient. They don't want to actually read the fine print, terms and conditions, contracts (not kidding), so they don't have what they need to get their project planning right t*he first time*. Anything worth doing takes patience and time (if you are hearing the refrain from the George Harrison's *Got My Mind Set On You,* you aren't alone). As we start talking about goals, build in time to research the tasks and figure out exactly (or as close to reasonably familiar as you can get) what they entail. But I am already short on time, that's why I am here. I know. But if you want to fix it you have to put in some time in the beginning to get more time in the end, no way around it. Don't let anyone tell you different, there is no magic class that will instantly clear your schedule for you. Is it time consuming? Yes. Is it less time consuming than doing it several times, dealing with disappointment and regrouping mentally, or getting sucked into litigation or depression? You bet.

When you are lining out your goals you will have several kinds. You will have personal goals and business goals. You will have spectrum goals and projects. I like the term spectrum better

than long term because it is easier to blow off "long term" goals. For me, when I want to get myself further along a spectrum it processes differently than when I look into "the future". The "future" is too broad and something I ALWAYS push to tomorrow. Doing a small bit to get further down the spectrum is something far easier for me. Then you will have the other things that insert themselves into your life that require attention (health issues, surprise layoffs, family status changes, etc.). Don't try to fix or improve everything at once. As you start you will want to take a few days and think about what your goals are and *why* they are important *to you*. You have to spend time really thinking to make meaningful corrections. We will hit on that when we debunk multitasking here in a bit. Knowing what will equate to the most guilt or actual consequences if it is not competed as you wish it to be can be essential for your piece of mind in the long run.

I closed the last lesson with questions about actually being a writer. When I decided I wanted to do this I had no idea what being a writer actually entailed beyond writing stories. I did what lots of wanna be writers do, I joined RWA. The things I brought with me were a cache of historical weapons knowledge, a background as a solider, academic and teacher. What I didn't have was a clue about the details of the writing job. It sounded cool and they made lots of money according to literally everyone. I got to work from home and be reclusive and difficult with some large publishing house as I lived the artist's life at my leisure. Right? Apologies for any coffee snorting that may have caused.

All kidding aside, I realized the only way to learn how to be a writer was to become friends with several and assess their lives. I know that sounds callous, but I was looking at my future and my family's long term well-being. I also wanted to know if these were the type of people I wanted to be classified with and spend the coming years with them as my peers and friends because in romance it is a small world even though there are ten thousand of us (you historical folks will pick up on the upper ten thousand similarity there). So I joined my local chapters, found the closest annual conference worth attending (which fortunately was held about two and a half hours from my house) and volunteered for two more chapters.

None of it was random, I chose those jobs and chapters because they got me familiar with lots of members quickly. I spent one year essentially on hold while I learned conference etiquette, how to interact on a professional level with nationally known authors, editors and agents, and essentially how to comport myself and swim with the toothiest of sharks. To some degree this sort of discovery and honing of expectations to the reality of the situation is important for writers in all stages of their career. Whether you are learning how to act at conference or learning how to effectively pitch your book to movie producers in Hollywood, there is always a next phase for you to investigate.

Some of you may have friends who are authors or you have published already and won't be starting completely from scratch as I was. With publishing changing so quickly there is always tons to learn. The big deal now is reader events. After I became involved with my local online and in person chapters, I attended events to see how they worked and to learn the ropes before I was ever invited. I paid attention to how and why the monthly workshop speakers were selected and how the process worked to become one.

Before anyone says I don't have time for that, it certainly wasn't easy for me. My first conference I had a toddler in tow and paid for my mother to come with me so she could help with my daughter. I needed to ask my family to help out at various times because my mother couldn't. I was actually doing my college homework while I was sitting in the workshops listening (multitasking was still in my plan then). I was in Plain Jane clothes because it was all I could afford after registration and hotel costs. Compared to some of the slick professionals in the rooms, I felt like the biggest loser ever for several reasons, mostly because I had to ask literally my entire close family for help and brought absolutely nothing to the table. The divide between where I was and where I wanted to be was yawning and crushing. I cried in the bathroom a lot that weekend. But…I did it. Then I did it again the next year as the hospitality chair and the gap was more like a canyon on Earth instead of a canyon on Mars, and it got better. I am still working on it but it took that phase of discomfort and the willingness to make an ass our of myself to get where I wanted to be. My long time pals who were there for that first go round say I was a little raggedy and they couldn't figure out why I was doing something else instead of listening to the workshops but I was otherwise OK. I came across as far less of a colossal loser than I thought. It was mostly in my head.

I did worked that conference for six more years in various forms and formats. Eventually, I was a board member of that chapter and headed up a major conference committee for several years. Now, I am a member of the RWA national ethics committee. In each of those things I became involved in, in each case when I am in that learning mode, I choose one thing and stick with it so there isn't much of a learning curve each year and the more I do something, the faster and more intuitively I can do it. The more involved I got the cheaper things became. It is extra work but you can make every bit of it work for you while you are being completely true to your fiduciary duties to those chapters. For instance, if I am doing a board stint I always run for VP of communications because I run a media company that builds websites or I run for VP Programs because I have experience with classes and know lots of other instructors. Both are in my wheelhouse, I'm not starting from scratch. I have been teaching for a long time and in the beginning when I was just standing up my company, being a VP Comm meant I got to work with some really good certified developers and builders and learned a ton, for free. I needed practice on a large and complex site, so I picked up being a webmaster for two other sites. I did and am still getting my practice every day. BUT, that fifteen minutes a day doubles as my romance networking AND training time for work. I was and am volunteering but I was and am accomplishing several goals with one task. Not the same as multitasking which is physically impossible.

I learned to build websites, became familiar with all the members in my chapter, learned how all sorts of RWA, chapter, conference, workshop, and reader event processes work from the administrative side so I know exactly what to do and ask now that I am the one getting invites. I am networking with others who are in my same place career wise without having to go out of my way to do it. I have met all sorts of national level writers, and I have learned what is expected of me when doing things like pitching, setting up events, moderating panels, putting out press releases and maintaining subscriber lists. All of those things are things I needed to know to be a successful author. I got the training for free while I was doing something for others. I promise I

am not trying to recruit any of you for board or chapter service but it can work for you and the chapter if you do it right. The bottom line is I didn't think I had time but taking a year to push back my books and get involved to make sure I really wanted to do this has served me well again and again. In the long run, it has saved me tons of time because I knew exactly what was required and what to do. It also kept my imagination (worries) and expectations realistic.

Lists, lists and more flipping list

I keep a notebook on my desk I think of as my back up memory. As I go through my day, I always think of all sorts of random things I need to do, ask, learn, etc. In the beginning, I wasn't sure what to do with those thoughts so I would jot them down and lose them, forget them or decide they were obvious enough that I would remember them and about half the time I did, the other half not so much. I will talk about the notebook I carry with me later, but at the end of the day when I reconcile what I did and didn't do, I have this sort of idea book that I keep. It has nothing but lists in it. My idea book eventually became large yellow stickies (all sizes, up to half a page size) I could shift day to day in my paper calendar as I went or shift to a few days ahead of my current page to the next payday or prep day for the coming board meeting. I will give you some examples.

Next grocery trip (goes on next payday, however, I highly suggest you look around for a store that does grocery pickup. Wal-Mart does this for instance, I log into the site and from my phone or computer build my list as I run out of things, I can even scan empty packages when they are empty and it will add them to my list. Then on payday I pay for everything in the "cart" and go pull in beside the store and they bring it out to me. No parking, no lines, no impulse buys. I LOVE it. You don't want to know how many annual hours that shaved off my schedule. Think 6-10 hours a week for a year.

People to eventually put in acknowledgements (I do keep a separate notebook beside my desk for stuff like this. I jot stuff down on a sticky and slip it inside the front cover, every once in a while when I need a no brainer task I go in and log all the stickies) on the right pages. Any random thing concerning writing goes in there so it isn't taking up space in my brain, all I want in there are stories and what I need to do to properly exist and be somewhat productive for the day.

If I have a meeting with a client coming up, I put that sticky (normally a 4x6) on my daily list every day for the ten days prior to the meeting so anything I come up with specific for that client I can jot down and remember.

Anything I am waiting to hear back on with a date requested beside it (Right now, for example, that sticky reads: Waiting on quote for cracked window fix (thank you rock throwing lawn mower), Waiting on X,Y, and Z chapters for dates for 2020 class schedule, Waiting on dance costume for kids ballet class (pictures in three weeks go be crabby about it next week), etc. These are things I know I need to know but don't need to know them right this instant. It keeps them on my radar and I don't worry about them and my mind has more space to create.

Other examples: Things to Do before next MO trip (I am from there, this trip is two years away so it goes on the first of every month for me to check, things like who to visit, things to pick up, events to try to make, etc.) The bottom line is I am not carrying those things around in my head, they are on paper in such a way that they are not forgotten on a previous page, move them forward so you stumble across them again when you need to. It is exhausting to do so.

The reason I keep my calendar and a few subject specific notebooks is so I can corral most of those random thoughts that when the time comes are quite useful. They are important and I will be upset with myself if I forget them. However, they are not actionable bits of information yet or they require work to act on them and I don't want to stop every time I have a thought about this or that. I also text myself throughout the day. At the end of the day, I go through and make sure I capture all the text messages to myself (I use hands free voice to text to text myself ideas and notes I get when I am driving since I obviously can't write it down right then), scraps of paper I stuff in my pockets or purse, scribbles on my daily notebook, or scribbles on my own arms and hands, and write all those important "random" thoughts down.

After doing this for a while, I realized every thought often feels valuable and if I didn't discount or "lose" it, I not only have the information, I can decide later in the night. Not having to break stride and reorient to determine the value of that information at the time makes it much easier to clear and quiet my mind at the moment. Then at the end of the day, I can take fifteen minutes and sort out all that with a clearer head when I am not under so much pressure then with the decks relatively clear, I can actually get to sleep and stay that way for a few hours. Clearing out all that random "stuff" throughout the day lets me do a much better job concentrating my efforts on the projects that I am focusing on right then.

In 2016, I was in an accident and sustained a (thankfully) minor traumatic brain injury. The first thing my rehab therapist taught me was the concept of neurological load. Your brain can only hold and carry so much at once. You have conscious and subconscious processes going at all times, even when you sleep. There is very little difference on brain scans between the level of work in your conscious "day brain" (as I call it) and unconscious brain "night brain". You would think your brain would rest when you sleep as well but it doesn't. It thinks, heals, gets rid of toxins, etc. If you are a 1980's kid you can think of sleep as your brain's chance to defrag every day. When you dump all these various thoughts into a planner or a few idea books or list books you free up more brain space for the projects or tasks that matter. Once you get used to flushing all the random noise out of your brain and onto paper or into a notebook you most likely will notice a far quieter mind in general. But you will find you start to wake up with solutions to problems and with ideas on how to make things work better instead of just an exhausted fog of nothingness in the morning. It takes a few weeks to get used to it but reading up on neurological load and assessing yours can be a very useful exercise in understanding why you feel tired and overwhelmed all the time. Letting your brain put down some of the weight that you might think doesn't matter can make a big difference. I didn't believe any of this one bit until I did it.

Incremental Achievement

A wise old sergeant once told me that if I wanted anything to happen, no matter what, I needed to do one thing a day to further that desire. He said it didn't matter if it was a fifteen second task or a five hour task. The amount of things and time to get to a goal can be thought of as a walk, even if you meander, you still have to cover the ground. Some things get you there sooner, but as long as you are moving, you will eventually get there.

I live by this principal. Every day I do one or two things on my house, business, both pen names, chapter work, conference work, family involvement, pets, friends and everything else. At the end of the night, I make my list for the next day, and I look at each of those categories and pick one or two things to do, no more than that unless there is a deadline then the decks get cleared a bit. It gives me a varied to do list that I can work several different ways. I look at the list and see what works, what can be combined, what I can roll to the next day for sanity's sake if the list is full, and what I have been putting off too long.

What do I mean by put off *too long*? Here is the key to making lists actual work. The first day I put something off I number it. So if "Do Blurb for WIP" gets pushed a day it gets a two with a circle around it in front of it. If I push it again it gets a three with a circle around it. If I get to ten (that's arbitrary for me since I plan really far out) I take some time to really look at that task and why I have thought it was OK to keep pushing it instead of doing it.

What about that task makes it important enough for me to keep putting it on the list but not important enough for me to make myself do it? Do I need to add some steps? Does it require supplies I don't have? Is it too hard? Do I need to ask a pal to help me? Do I just really not want to do it and I need to MAKE myself do it no matter what? Do I not really know how to do it and need to do some research? Does it even REALLY need to be done? Can I skip it and readjust my thinking so I don't worry about whatever that was? If you have an organization or commitment that isn't mandatory whose numbers are consistently high, consider making a plan to ease out of that commitment when you can do so in a way you can live with.

If I start numbering something, I take a hard look and figure out why I haven't done it and make special arrangements to do it or I eliminate it from the list and come to grips with not doing it. Either way, it loses its real estate in my brain on day ten.

So how do I start?

I started by carrying around a blank notebook (I get hard cover ones from Dollar Tree so they don't get destroyed). The five by eight inch one is my favorite to carry because it is small enough to fit in my purse and large enough I can write my list on one side of the page and jot down ideas and to do's for the future on the other side of the page. I keep an 8 .5 by 11 calendar and a few other notebooks (my idea books, I spoke about that already) at home, but for mobile use I use a notebook. Electronics don't work for me, I like the tactile part of making lists and keeping a calendar. Also, it my phone is a distraction and a temptation. When I am thinking I have learned I need to get rid of electrical fields. That may sound a little woo-woo for some of you but it distracts me. That is why there is so much literature out there about the benefits of walking outside. Electromagnetic pollution is a thing and in a normal house you have routers, internet TVs, phones, and all manner of other electronics. For me having a niche somewhere to go hide in

for a few minutes a night helps. For me it's my back porch swing of my guest bathroom (which no one used but me and is immaculate) if it's past dark or the weather is bad. Unplugging for even ten minutes a day helps me think too. I am unplugged when I sleep you might say, but are you? Where does your phone go at the end of the day? Do you have an ereader on your nightstand or a tablet? Consider putting all those things on airplane mode at the end of the night and see how you feel. Get them out of sight and no longer spitting out energy waves. These are all things TBI patients are taught within the first two weeks.

Everyone says I should journal…I don't have the time or desire to journal, but I find that general process of writing at the end of the day and reconciling all the days items, next days items, etc. is indeed soothing so I do this instead. The calendar is also super handy at tax time as a cooberating record for all my other work related documentation.

In this bigger paper calendar, family and personal stuff go on one side of the page and work goes on the other. If you want to see what I mean search two person appointment books. It has all the times down one side and two nice big columns. That way I see every single day how much I do or don't do for "work" and writing. Keeping the two lists separate became essential to make sure I wasn't spending more time working and volunteering than I was with my family and doing personal upkeep. It's important you keep a realistic handle on that no matter how you decide to do it.

Most classes tell you to sit down and make a list of what you want to do over the next year, five years and ten years. I find that a bit daunting and prefer to start by asking my students to take a day or two and make a list of all the things that come to mind that they feel they are neglecting, should be doing, or that they aren't doing well enough or fast enough and start there. Pick one spectrum (long term) goal and one project and start focusing on those. Keep your list, you'll get to it.

Evaluate yourself

When I started the first thing I had to do was evaluate myself. I had to realize how much work I was actually doing and how much work I was willing to do in a day. I also had to take about a year to realize busy is not typically the same as productive. I knew I needed to make more progress and work less actual hours to make more time for my family and my health and sanity. One of the things not everyone realizes is that if you are your own boss and you work at home it is really hard to stop or get away from the office. When you need (or want) money and your ability to get it is in that computer on that desk in the next room it can be really difficult to relax and stay away from it. Everyone has to find out what they are comfortable with and give themselves permission to do those hours and be able to stop. Otherwise, writer's can drive themselves to distraction, burn out, and exhaustion.

I work a lot. I work around sixteen hours a day because I combine so many things with my everyday tasks. When I say combine things I mean I situate lists to be efficient and mix tasks to be done with as little effort as possible so my day finds a rhythm and stays there. For example, I

schedule everything but I also schedule breaks for meals and stretching so I don't feel awful by 3pm. Putting self-care on the list and taking my ability to go into account in a real way leaves me where I can still function and run my family efficiently and work that much. For me that is the only way I can calm down and sleep at night. Work on a smooth flow with enough mental bandwidth left to roll with emergencies is how I have to go about it. While I am not wired to take it easy I have had to force myself to learn to take two minute meditation breaks, ten minute stretch breaks, a twenty minute yoga session (a few times a week, not every day), etc. so my days are long but they include what I need. For a long time I thought something was wrong with me because I didn't want to stop. If I just kept going I would eventually get "there". It doesn't work that way if you push yourself over the edge every day. If you are geared to work six or sixteen hours a day, you do what is right for you. No one else has to work or live with your schedule (except maybe your family) so only take into account the opinions of those it directly touches. What works for five thousand other authors may not be the best plan for you.

When you evaluate yourself and your situation some of these questions might be helpful:

How tired are you at the end of the day?

How happy and or content are you?

Are you angry, frustrated or do you feel guilty about not doing something or not doing enough of something?

How realistic are you about what you want long term, production and project wise?

Do you set unrealistic goals because you know there is no way you will meet them so you don't have to worry about what comes next or about really putting any effort in starting?

Does something about your home make you miserable? If so is it something you can adjust? (For me it was spending so much time doing laundry to begin with)

As you consider the reality of being a writer, what things do you really want to do? What do you want to hire out? If you plan to hire out something, like doing your website (either temporarily or permanently), then you need to make sure you aren't researching those things to "be ready to do that someday" when you have more pressing things to do today. Also, if you are building things like social media presence, newsletters, etc. and want to be able to hand them off to a personal assistant or other freelancer, you need to build them in a way that makes sense (with a plan and formal format for what you are posting) and some routine to it so someone else can do it for you. Have some form and function to things. Imagine the task you are considering handing off, have you set it up in a way that you could explain how you do it so that someone else could take over? If not, you might want to.

This next thing is hard to hear for many writers, but it has to be said. Make sure you evaluate your talent for writing. I don't mean that as in whether or not you have any. I mean look at it and figure out where you think you are comparatively. Do you need to make more time for classes on grammar, story structure or dialogue? Do you need to read books on formatting? Do you need to research your genre more? Make sure you understand how much time you need to actually

become an excellent writer. All the marketing and promotion savvy in the world won't save bad books. As you build your master schedule and determine which goals to go after first, building in time to generally become a better writer should not be overlooked. Critique groups, editing, drafting, an occasional craft book in the potty instead of Cosmo are all good places to start. Don't know how you rate in your genre, volunteer to judge a contest in your genre. It will often be an eye opening experience as to where you are on the spectrum. Be careful *entering* contests for this purpose. The requirements for judges are scant at best and it is a complete crap shoot as to how qualified or talented they are at giving feedback, it is an art in itself. Do not gauge yourself on contest feedback unless it resonates with you as correct and if it is bad ALWAYS get a second or third opinion.

Apologies for being indelicate, for a long time (especially before I finished my last degree) for me, improving as an author meant reading craft books so I kept one in the restroom and if I had to use the restroom I read a few paragraphs. My last two years of college I finished several craft books that way. When I started doing that I would occasionally get pulled into one and after a while my husband finally asked me if I had a digestion issue and needed to be seen by someone. When I am waiting in line or on hold this is my go to, I keep one on my phone most of the time but only one. I normally get them on Overdrive from my library for free. That also means I get them for fourteen days so I have a ticking clock. Read it or don't, if I don't then it must not have been that important to me and now I know.

I also buy and download RWA national seminars onto my little mobile laptop I mainly use for conferences. When I am home that laptop sits on a shelf be side my dryer and is tuned to myRWA or my local chapter that records seminars online and posts the audio. The hour I still spend folding clothes and cleaning my private bathroom once a week is spend listening to seminars.

I don't know how many of you are religious, but there are some really good motivational books out there that are written by religious leaders. Since we are talking about evaluating ourselves one of the best books I read in the beginning, is a book by Joyce Meyer called *Do It Afraid*. There is tons of religion based material in the book, but the premise is excellent no matter what your faith (or if you are an atheist that is fine too). Joyce talks about how for new things or big things you are often afraid. She runs one of the largest ministries in the world and helps people in 87 countries etc. She started out as a poor housewife in rural Missouri (which is where I am from so I watched her grow and do amazing things considering where she started) and built this worldwide outreach ministry.

What anyone can take from her book is that you may not feel like you have the tools to do what you want, but you can get them. You may need to ask for help or barter for help but you can do it. Even after you have the tools you may be afraid to move on. But according to Joyce, you have to learn to do it afraid if you want to succeed. Push through, ask the hard questions, do the long hours (sometimes) and simply do it anyway. For me, this was a big realization. Religion aside, I was afraid, I was afraid of success, not succeeding, being invisible, all of it. I had to find a way to move forward. I thought when I knew enough I wouldn't be hesitant, nervous or "afraid". I was wrong. I realized I wasn't the only one who was afraid, intimidated, worried, and hesitant on

occasion. The more I conquered project after project, the more confidence I gained and the less afraid and hesitant I was. Now I am still apprehensive occasionally, but for the most part it is much easier for me to complete tasks and really and truly move on. For me the only way to do that was to do it.

Evaluate Your Progress

When I was in high school I spent months trying to decide which branch of the service I wanted to join. I stopped by the recruiter's office a few times a week (it was near the school). I asked this question and that. I took this exam and that one to see what I might want to do. I had them draw up dates for me that I might be able to leave and the lists of available jobs if I did go ahead and enlist on this or that date. Finally, after about two months of me taking up these guys time, a Navy NCO with more stripes than courtesy flat told me I needed to "sh*t or get off the pot". I was appalled that he would say something like that to me. Apologies for the sort of cursing, BTW.

But he had a point and in recent years I have found that advice to be particularly helpful. I had done everything I possibly could and it was time for me to make some hard decisions. Decisions that needed to be made and questions I needed to answer while I didn't have all the information I needed to answer them and no one could do it for me. So when you go to evaluate your progress and where you are currently, you have to be ruthless on how far along you are and what things should probably come off your shelf and get on their way to an editor (indie or traditional). I sat on my books for three years. The first two years was legitimate. I needed to improve craft wise and decide what publishing path I wanted to take. The last year was fear. There is often a line between being patient and having good judgement and chickening out. As you plan your goals and projects be aware of where that line is for you. Sometimes before getting caught up in a project is the best time to establish that.

The next and most important thing is is what you are doing working? If yes, wonderful, move on. If not, reevaluate and make an improvement. Is it working after that? Yes, wonderful, move on. No, repeat reevaluate and make improvements until it works. Once something works *move on*. Don't go back and do it again because it is fixed, works, or is now easy. Don't keep reading books on formatting if you are perfectly capable of formatting your book as you need it done. If you want to switch programs do your research of course, but don't keep doing something because you know enough about it that it is comfortable and not really a challenge anymore, but is technically furthering you goals or project in some loose but not really kind of way. That's cheating ☺

As you start to assess what does and doesn't work for you, and start to make changes if something doesn't work, *DO NOT try to do it the same thing you have been doing a different way*. Try to consider a totally new approach or process, not just a different way of completing the process. Sometimes finding a new way to do things can be an epic boon for you. If it isn't, what have you go to lose? If you are looking at it, the process is not working anyway.

If you feel like you are choosing from two bad options step back and reassess the whole situation. Decide what would be the perfect solution and ask why you can't have that. Be brave and think about the best way to get what you want.

When I was closing in on the last year of my English degree I was going to school online because I was very ill after the birth of my daughter. I needed two more upper level classes to finish my degree and I had taken everything in the catalog. I also needed to write my book. I had entered Cherry Adair's Finish The Damn Book Challenge and wanted to meet the challenge. I also had a conference coming up in a year that I wanted to pitch that book. I could NOT manage school, the conference, the book, and going to a local brick and mortar college to pick up those last credits, the logistics weren't an option and neither was the money.

I thought to myself, what would be the absolute best case scenario? I was brainstorming the problem and laughingly jotted down "write book as senior project and last two classes". After a few hours of thinking about it I kept coming back to that because it was really the best thing that would work but unfortunately it was impossible. Then I realized it wasn't. The catalog had a course number for an independent study program for two students each semester for 400-600 level English.

I spent the next few hours digging into the books and manuals on how to apply for an independent study. It took four tries to find a faculty member who was willing to take me on because romance... She signed on and I had to meet with the head of the English department. I made up a schedule for two terms, included a break out of my book (one or two chapters a week with the whole book to be complete half way through the second term so I could edit it for the second half of the term according to faculty feedback), craft books (two per month that I would do a summary on every other week) and I had to provide an article once a month on the industry and how I would market my book accordingly. After much discussion the department head agreed.

I ended up with my last two courses paid (I had veteran's tuition assistance), at an online school I loved, on a topic I loved. So what had started out as a nightmare ended just the opposite. I ENJOYED my last two courses immensely. I had an excuse to spend ten to fifteen hours per week working on my book, guilt free because it was home work. I met all my deadlines (personal and actual). Plus, I finished the two terms with my degree, a finished book that had been edited by my college English professor for free and I was able to use that story as a way to pitch the book that fall. I had also read fourteen books on craft I would have way felt too guilty to read otherwise. I could not have hoped for a better situation. All I really had to do was really think about it, send a few emails, do a few hours' worth of paper work, and take an hour long phone call to make it happen. Never underestimate what you can do simply by knowing exactly what you need and pursing it. If they had said no I would not have lost more than a few hours of my time. Them saying yes changed my life.

S.M.A.R.T. Goals

This acronym is quote from several sources these days but is a basic premise taught in most science classes and nearly all team building and project management programs. As you look at your goals try to move away from anything vague. Try to frame your new goals or projects in the S.M.A.R.T. format.

S - Specific - Be as specific as possible as to what the goal, step or project is. This requires some time to weed through the generalities. Be prepared to spend more time thinking about them but having a more attainable list when you are done.

M - Measureable - If you can, make it something you know for sure when it is done. Work on submission, no. Send submission to one editor and one agent alternately every week, yes! Read one craft book at all times, no. Read at least two paragraphs of a craft book per day, yes! Spend more time with family, no. Fix pancakes every Sunday made from cake mix instead of pancake mix (with sprinkles) for a special family breakfast, yes!

A - Achievable - Make sure it is something you have the tools and skill set to do. You might want to research, vet and then figure out how to pay for a service to do the things you can't.

R - Realistic and Relevant - Be ruthless with what you know you can and will do. Also, make sure your goals apply to what you want. That goes back to making sure you know what you want in general. The old adage of be careful what you ask for applies here. If you plan to "build platform on Facebook" instead of polishing your book or getting it out to an editor, in a few months you will have more Facebook friends and no book to sell them.

T - Time Restricted - Even if you are working on spectrum goals you can break them down so that steps can be completed in a certain amount of time. Trick yourself, set deadlines using contests, horse trade with your family for time, do whatever it takes to keep getting things done.

Final note on this, when you are looking at your goals, especially for women, really evaluate what you husband, partner, kids, parents etc. NEED from you, not what they WANT from you. Friends too for that matter. Really consider what your life requires, not what you think you need to do every day. In the beginning, I had a REALLY hard time shaking the "I should be able to do it all because my mom did or my grandma did" feeling. I had to choose a few things those ladies did to carry into my life, a few recipes, teaching my daughter one or two things from them, making my mom spend more time with my daughter instead of me teaching her about mom. I come from a very rural Midwest upbringing where the gender roles are very entrenched. Be careful of this, I am not saying that sort of thing is bad, quite the contrary, just don't let it run you into the ground trying to be all things to all people, you simply can't do it and remain healthy and happy.

Intestinal Fortitude

Don't kid yourself. Doing even part of this takes *intestinal fortitude* (guts). Changing how you think and go about things and making time to write, edit, dream and succeed is one of the most difficult things you can do. Don't let anyone minimize the effort, work and the sheer genius

required to get books written and keep your daily lives together. As an author you are signing on to love the process and the practice as much as you love the result (the book itself). This is often a thankless job. You have to do it for you. You can't do it solely for the fans, they can be fickle. You can't do it solely for the money, because it isn't stable. For me, when I stopped doing what was expected and started doing what I knew in my heart was right for me, meeting goals and completing projects didn't start happening overnight but it did eventually happen.

So start thinking, small changes that give you five minutes for a cup of tea to start the day to big changes that get you in line for a big traditional contract with movie deals to boot, what do you want from all this? The essence of being a creative is making something from nothing. You are already well qualified to do that, your future is only limited by your inability to see it and try for it. Instead of saying that is impossible, too hard, etc. think what your best case scenario would be if you could do anything at all. Then determine if there really is an actual reason you can't have that besides you having convinced yourself you can't. Remember, you can do hard things, I can't imagine any scenario where you aren't already doing so.

Until next time…

Warm Regards,

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