Lesson 4 - Taking the First Step and Watching for Potholes

Welcome to lesson four! Tonight we are going to follow on with a few more things before we start talking about specific things like social media, networking and other things that can be time black holes, but that still need to be done.

First, as you start evaluating your daily grind, I want to talk some about what some of my more unexpected weak spots were so you will have an idea of some things that may be costing you time that you might not initially look for. Remember, everyone's situation is different, so where each of you find your time and how you find it will be different.

As you are starting out doing your "observation phase" take those few days and give yourself permission to not write. In your mind, come to terms with your "work" for the week being to watch how you operate. Take that week and really pay attention to every aspect of your routine. Make notes, get a three dollar Wal-Mart stop watch and jot down how long things take. *Just observe, don't try to solve the problems as you identify them or you will never get done observing.* You can always take a few days here and there to do it again once you have solved any glaring issues but take a good look to begin with in observe mode only.

Things I noticed during my first week of observation after just a few days:

Being on hold was not my enemy.

Setting a specific time to make what I anticipated to be long phone calls and doing them at my desk with some other semi-mindless task to do while I am on hold/getting transferred/etc. proved a big time saver. I was really sick during my pregnancy and after my daughter was born. I spent countless hours on the phone with our insurance company, our doctor, emergency rooms trying to get records moved, etc. After a while, I realized if I thought about it before I made the call and had a short list of tasks that did not require my full attention that I could complete while I was handling the calls I had more time later in the day to start circling my thoughts back to and focusing on the nights writing. This may seem obvious but I was always one to tackle things right off and not necessarily make sure I had some little thing to do because a call should only last five minutes, but they never really only last five minutes.

This could be anything, arguing with your cable company, talking to your web host, growling at your cell phone provider to fix an over charge, or calling to get information from a company on whatever you need to garner info on. Try to plan making the calls in a single sitting if possible and have tasks to do while you are on hold. It doesn't sound like much but my first week I timed this and that I realized I was spending a combined two to four hours on hold each week. Now first thing the morning I make calls with a task to complete with my hands as well as the one I am doing on the phone. I am working my task while talking to whoever. Even if it is just sorting the spam out of my email, it is one less thing for me to do later. This may seem like multi-tasking but it isn't. Once I have someone to talk to I put down whatever the mindless task is and focus solely on my conversation.

Surprisingly, it also helped me keep my zen a little bit because I wasn't getting mad because I was on hold six minutes here and eleven minutes there. I certainly couldn't write that way but I could clear "schedule clutter" enough that I could allocate more time to write later that night.

I had to loosen the screws.

I realized a few days into my initial observation week, because I wanted to write SO badly, that every second of the day I wasn't writing I felt like I *should* be writing. I felt as if my time to make it as an author was slipping away, that I just wasn't good enough, smart enough or fast enough to crank out fiction like my peers were. They made time and produced great books like it was nothing (so it seemed, I know better now of course). I needed way more time to create anything on that level. I felt like I needed to be writing in long uninterrupted stints to have a shot at being an author at all, but I couldn't possibly neglect my family or other obligations to do it, so I just sort of gave up and at the end of the day felt like a failure.

If you are doing this to yourself, STOP IT, RIGHT NOW. First off, I realized that even if I HAD every hour of every day to write it still wouldn't *feel* like enough. Reread that. I felt like if I just had enough TIME I would be able to get it done. The truth, for me, I found out, was I was thinking of it backwards. I had imagined writing as something to do like jogging or cleaning and *doing* it was the same as making actual *progress* on my book. I thought if I just sat at my desk and calmed down enough, and focused enough, that I would eventually write in a way that felt right. All I did, in reality, was sit down and take care of all the small tasks I had piled up over the course of the day and writing (because it was a big time consuming project) always came in last and by the time I got to it, I was too tired to do it well.

I had to change my process from the calm down and complete miscellaneous tasks section first to doing those things after writing. Which meant sometimes they didn't get done as thoroughly as I would have liked and that I had to come to terms with the guilt of that. So I started to choose which guilt I was going to live with. Guilt over putting off laundry for a day or doing a small grocery trip run today to the local store instead of the four hour marathon bi-weekly run to Costco OR guilt over not even trying to hit my word count for the day or whatever my chosen author related task was for that day.

I never got to where I didn't feel bad about not getting everything done in a day, I still do that but much less often and with much less weight. But, I got to where I was producing pages every single day. Sometimes it was only one, but one is still one page closer to THE END. So now I sit down and instead of checking Facebook, answering emails, reading loop digests, RWA e-Notes, or other things I can do with a little less focus [like when I am on hold ;)], I review my outline for the chapter I am working on for two or three minutes and reread only, not edit, the last five pages (only) and I go. If I just can't get into it and it sucks at the end of thirty or forty minutes or at the end of the chapter I stop and save it separately. Sometimes I will have three or four versions of the same chapter at the end of a week and that last night I read them all and pick one or combine

the good parts. Bottom line, sometimes I can get another chapter done in a night, other times it takes a week, BUT I GET THE CHAPTER DONE. I am producing work.

The most important thing is to produce product. Above all else, you must write the book. *All the other marketing, promoting, networking, etc. is all for nothing and a completely meaningless waste of time if you aren't creating saleable product along with it, however, slowly.* The problem lots of writers have is they get too far out of their story between sessions. It is valid, and I haven't met a single author who doesn't struggle with this from time to time for various reasons.

For me, I forget the mood of the scene or where I am at in my plot. I weave mysteries into my books and they are detail heavy and complex. So I make detailed outlines of exactly what has to go into each chapter. My outline will read things like "hero and heroine need to talk about x, drop hint about y", "secondary character, John needs to have convo with hero about horse being stolen" or "heroine needs to have intimate convo with hero and get interrupted". Having an outline like this gives me small sections to think about during the day while the rest of me is going about real life.

I carry that outline of the chapter I am working on with me all the time or at least keep it on the day's list in my calendar. I use one of those big 4 x 6 inch post its on the days page in my big 8.5 x 11 calendar so I can move it to the next day if I don't move on to the next part (and a new sticky). I will also take a picture of the stick or the section of outline I am focusing on on my phone so I have it. Even if it is a picture of my computer screen I have it. If I am in line, on a short hold, doing whatever, and have a short amount of time, that outline is what I am looking at if there isn't anything else I have on tap to finish. I remind myself where I was on my chapter throughout the day so when I sit down to write I am much faster getting my head back in the story because I was only out of it for a few hours.

When I sit down to write, I go right to my writing (two minute rule). Retraining myself to write first and do small tasks I KNEW FOR SURE I COULD FINISH and see quick results second (so I felt validated and worthy as a regular person) was one of the hardest things I had to do. For me, I felt like that step of making myself write first (good, bad, or ugly) was when things changed for me production wise. To be clear, there was nothing comfortable or rewarding about that at first. And my first few weeks, I created utter crap that I later deleted. I was aiming to build the process, not create quality work, but I knew that so it was OK and I could live with it. Once I completed the eighth or ninth chapter and some of it was even good (not all of it mind you) I realized I could *eventually* finish.

Something that was hard about it, once I got into the habit, was deciding when to stop writing so I could complete those other daily tasks I still needed to complete. I learned each day was a balance of how much time I could write before I had to go back to work on everything else, but it moved writing up from the bottom of the list enough that I was able to make progress.

I had to come to terms with me wanting to get things done right that moment and when things actually needed to get done.

I was very impatient to get answers when I started trying to reprogram myself. I felt like any time some new thing or problem came up I needed answers right then if I could manage it. I would call places, go see people, explain things to five different operators to try to get things done in one phone call or one visit. When I started keeping a detailed calendar I realized often I didn't actually HAVE to have that information that same day. I could break problems up into smaller tasks and solve them over a longer period of time. They still got solved just not right then. This won't work for everything, but it can work to lighten your overall load per day sometimes. The key to this for me was being able to write a problem down on a future page of my calendar and come back to it then. I didn't lose the task but it could then be completed at a time that was better for my schedule and it helped cut down on days where my to do list was so big there was just no possible way I was gone to complete it.

For example, problems with bills and things that needed to be taken care of but didn't have to be done right that moment (any time during the billing cycle would do really), I would try sending emails first (if the explanation of the problem was not extensive to the point of an email taking longer to write than the original phone call would have), then I would call after two or three days if I couldn't get it fixed with an email. After a few weeks I found not only did I often get things solved that way, I had a written record of what people told me, which came in handy far more often than I would have guessed. This was also better because I had the information written down once the email was in my sent box so I knew exactly what was requested, so I didn't have to remember the exact contents of conversations. And since it was softcopy in my email, I wasn't creating some stray page of notes to keep up with or trying to keep some random conversation in my head until the next attempt to fix something or some call back that might or might not happen. If you do have to do that, another large sticky note with all the details on it that you can roll along in your calendar as you go is also good for this, or a notes page in your phone that deals with any ongoing issues so you can free up that brain space for other things.

If I needed to ask a friend something, and I knew if I called that friend it was going to be a long drawn out conversation because I would get off track/topic, I would often send an email and specifically tell them why they were getting an email instead of a call. My emails would read, "I am struggling to stay on task (or I have put myself on a deadline) and I REALLY want to chat and catch up and if I call I will, so for now I really just need to know X. Can we set a time to catch up to?" And I would set up a specific time to chat and make sure to make and have those calls and then I was able to allow myself to not feel guilty because I was having a social call with a friend. I did try to make sure I had clothes to fold or a dishwasher to load before I called, but I was still able to enjoy the chat.

My lists gave me comfort.

I carry a small notebook with me for my to-dos when I am out and about. I like my lists. They give me comfort that I am doing the best I can to get things done as quickly as possible. That means I have made every effort and I have hit the threshold of the time I can shave off of things so I no longer ALLOW myself to feel guilty about it. I make myself turn off the guilt and constant pressure in the back of my mind that says I should be writing. The time to make sure I have little bits to do during the day, and to make sure I am going about my day in the most efficient way possible is when I am planning the next days list/schedule at the end of the night, not while I am going through the day. Feeling guilty while I am working my way through the days list is useless and only makes me feel bad. If I am confident I am doing the best I can time wise on things in general then I don't need to feel bad. There are lots of ways to make time but you can't get blood from a stone. You will eventually not be able to free up anymore in a day, when that happens, and it will happen try not to beat yourself up. Have faith in yourself that you are doing the best you can and don't give up. Do think about it and work as logically as you can, don't get lazy but realize you can't fix everything at once, it is all a process.

At the end of the night, I take a few minutes and take all my scraps of paper, scratched off lists, other bits of scribbled notes of things I need to do and my text messages to myself from over the course of the day and I write in everything I did THAT day before I make my list for the next day. I do that so I can take a few minutes (normally between five and ten, no more than that) and I really take note of how much I actually did accomplish that day and give myself permission to be pleased with it. Something I was doing and something I noticed my peers and friends doing was not giving myself credit for making it through a rough or super busy day well. If you don't take the time to recognize when you do well and make progress you will never keep up with any improvements or changes because they aren't giving you any joy or relief.

Once I look at how much I did that day, I make the next day's list. This is normally the last thing I do before I go to bed, so that I can give myself permission to not feel bad that I didn't get one specific thing done (when I DID get eighteen other things done that day) and I can move that one last thing to tomorrows list. Also it gives me some peace of mind that I have all my tasks for the next day written down so I can mentally let them go while I sleep. I can't DO anything while I sleep except defrag and clean your brain, so writing it down (for me) means I can let myself relax until I wake up. It may sound silly to some of you, but getting my mind to shut down so I can rest and have the mental capacity to think deeply enough to get more words on the page has a lot to do with how much sleep I get and how good that sleep is. Any small thing I can do to give myself a little bit of peace and even joy, is normally worth it. So you may find small things that give you that bit of peace and joy, don't underestimate or undervalue them.

I had to learn to shake things off.

I started paying attention to what things frustrated me. I found I would have something take longer than I thought it should and it would throw off my whole day. I also found that my stress would build over the course of the day (because I didn't take time to calm

down DURING the day, which compounded how stressful each ensuing situation was) and by the end of the day it would take me hours to wind down enough that I could write, if I could at all.

I started taking a minute here and there to calm down. Literally, sixty seconds to sit still and calm myself down. But I am always in a hurry and I don't have time for that you might say. Try it, maybe just when you notice you are really upset, just for a day or so to begin with. For instance, when I would come out of a doctor's appointment angry because I couldn't get my provider to listen to what I was telling her, instead of her treating what she thought I was experiencing, I would be furious. It would build throughout the day until the smallest thing would make me feel awful. So when I started getting mad or stressed when I had a second I would step into a bathroom, hide in my car or just step out of the room with the kid and stand in the hall for sixty seconds and try to put it in perspective and calm down. Most people have timers on their phones these days which is what I used.

I would take those sixty seconds and try to clear my mind and think of an actual solution I could move toward, minus emotions, or I would realize I was too angry and frustrated to come up with a good solution, and then I would give myself permission to calm down and figure out a solution later in a few hours, when I was more calm. Learning to short circuit that building of stress and anger throughout the day made a big difference in how long it took me to focus when I finally sat down at the end of the night. Plus, it made a big difference health wise in the long run.

These days I stay pretty zen *overall,* but I still have moments where my temper flares. I can be all about being mad occasionally. I am as Irish as they come, and that stereotypical Irish temper can be no joke (at least for me). So when I say it can be hard to force yourself to get into the habit of keeping your center, it was no easy road for me either, and it requires constant effort still. But even taking that edge off a little during the day can be super helpful.

Me, Myself and Mad

After I thought I was passed getting wound up and mad by about two years, I volunteered to be on a committee for an annual event. It was the first time since grade school, someone actively disliked me just because I was there. I had to deal with a specific person who no kidding grade school level bully disliked me for the duration of year, professionally it would have reflected really poorly on me to just quit. I would go to meetings and this person would say mean or snarky things to me. The other members said nothing and as a professional, the right move was to ignore it during the meeting and say something in private later in some cases. In others, the answer was to just ignore it. I did that and the private conversations with her, when they did really just have to happen, always contained an apology, but it did nothing to stop the comments from happening again next time when we were back in front of other people.

I would get so mad because being the professional and taking the high road, not saying things back, was supposed to be satisfying, it wasn't. I would end up rehearsing the perfect response or what I should have said in my head for hours. Every time I did that it would make me mad all over again. Finally, a very dear friend of mine, after listening to me vent a few times had the following conversation with me:

  Friend: "How does it make HER feel when she upsets you like this?"

  Me: "I don't know, she probably doesn't care or is happy about it."

  Friend: "You're right, she does not seem to care one iota about how you feel because she keeps doing it. She doesn't respect you as a person or she wouldn't do it to begin with, and she probably doesn't give it a second thought after it is said or she is indeed happy about upsetting you."

  Me, a little unsure: "That sounds right."

  Friend: "Can you change it to where YOU being upset translates into her being upset or makes HER feel bad?" *light bulb warming up and getting ready to come on*

  Me: "No."

  Friend: "Then you are the one who is doing something wrong."

  Me: *got angry and wanted to defend myself but kept my trap firmly shut*

  Friend: "You are the ONLY one upset. Just because what is right and fair in the universe says if you are upset she should know and feel bad for it does not mean it is the case. The ONLY one upset right now is you. You did the right thing, you were the professional so follow through with that and *LET IT GO*. No matter how mad you get, she DOESN'T care, she simply doesn't care, NOT ONE BIT about how YOU FEEL, and I would be really surprised if she was thinking of you at all. *She is winning by letting you completely destroy your own peace of mind.* I suspect she knows that and lets you do the work for her."

  At first, I felt like my friend had changed teams on me and was saying I was wrong. Then the wisdom of her words sunk in. In situations where people were nasty to me, me being upset and ruminating on the situation never changed the actual situation, solved the root problem, or did anything to make me feel better in a real way. It made me feel less wronged to work it over in my mind a few dozen times so I hoped I might not be wronged in that way again, because I would know how to handle it. But of course, those same situations never reoccurred so my mental practice was for nothing. What it really did was wind me up, keep me stressed out, and every small thing after that seemed several times worse than it really was.   It was a bitter pill to realize the only one who cared that I was upset by something really was just me most of the time. So I started letting go, unless it really just had to be addressed, when I knew the only person hurt by something was me. At first it felt like I was letting all the jerks get away with something or that I was condoning their bad behavior, but in truth, the toxic folks in my life really didn't care what I thought or felt anyway so I really was the only person I was hurting and I had the power to stop most of that by changing my perspective.

When I would sit down to write, sometimes my mind would drift off my writing to the person who had upset me, and I couldn't concentrate. I would get distracted and upset. I had to get really strict about not allowing myself to let those things creep into my mind.

It felt so good to hang onto that feeling of righteous indignation, doing so let me feel like I wasn't accepting being walked all over. In truth, letting myself cool down, finding an actual solution later, and letting go of the anger wasn't nearly as satisfying, but was far more healthy and productive. When I did start to let go of situations that made me angry like that and focus on the issue, not how I felt, I was able to focus on my writing much better, sooner, and longer than if I was ruminating on things.

It was a terribly hard thing to retrain myself to do. And even now, after five years of doing it, I still have things that are harder than others to let go of. But I do it. Throughout every day, if I catch myself replaying situations that are driving up my stress I make an effort to let that stress go. When I sit down to write, I have far more clarity for the work much sooner.

Mental Clutter

When I originally wrote this lesson, I wanted to talk about getting some separation between the daily grind and your work as an author. When I was digging for time, I realized that in taking that first step I had to deal with some mental clutter and make a place for my writing. All the things above helped me do that. Then I started looking at the things we have covered already like homemaking to give me some breathing room. Then I moved on to some other things like making sure I felt OK and was healthy, warm, fed, etc.

The things above all generally lead to better mental and physical wellness. When you are looking at where to make time you should look at adding some self-care, even if it is just two minutes a day to sit in a quiet space and collect yourself. For me that was very counter-intuitive and guilt inducing in the beginning but it started to pay off within a few weeks. Really, weeks, not days, so give it some time before you write self-care off as stupid and not worth your time. Writers are notorious for overtasking themselves, taking on too much, and suffering from depression. In the coming lessons we will talk at length about diverting from that norm and saying no more often than you probably are. Again, it may seem counterintuitive, but making an effort to not be so hard on yourself and give yourself an occasional few seconds to catch your breath, can help out immensely. As you have probably ascertained by now, I essentially had to trick or force myself into allowing myself some breathing room.

While I was in the service, we called had a phrase we used for folks who pushed forward all the time without taking time to refocus or reassess the original situation, it was "all thrust, no vector". That was me for a long time. I had the "want" and the motivation but no real, actionable plan. I had so much desire to be an author and no solid, specific plan to get there that I was essentially stressing/burning myself out without really accomplishing anything. So make sure you take some time to keep yourself together mentally and break down what you want to do into doable bits so when you do sit down

to write, you can get into your zone faster, stay there better, and start making that progress you are seeking so fervently.

Thought Suppression

I wanted to include a quick note on this before we close. When you start to try to implement these types of changes and new ways to deal with things remember cold turkey usually does not work. When you try to ignore something or change a habit "cold turkey" (in sociology, at least) is called *thought suppression* (it is also *urge suppression* but I never saw that phrase anywhere but a text book). You suppress the thought or urge to do something certain way, but if you don't *give you mind a clear substitute or new way to handle a situation* sticking with a change can be much more difficult than trying the change with an alternate method in mind.

For changes to work you have to have a clear, well thought out substitute to replace the behavior or process (hopefully something simpler, faster and easier). You and those it affects need to be clear about what is going to happen and on board to support the change. As you observe your daily grind, observe not just the task, but what need it serves (for you and your family). You can change most tasks to accomplish the need, but you can't always change the need itself. Sometimes you can change both, but simply being aware of which you are doing, and why, can be the difference in something that works, and works the first time, and something that doesn't.

Have a lovely weekend! Until next time...

Warm Regards,
Merien