INTRODUCTION

DEAR HAPPY READERS,

I figure I should start off by telling you who I am. I’m the Happy Writer and I help writers find the Happy in the hard.

Admittedly, I’m no Pollyanna. There’s stuff about writing and publishing that makes me unhappy. I bet some of the same things make you unhappy, too.

But I’ve learned that being unhappy and focusing on the negative stuff stifles my creativity and makes writing un-fun. And why would any of us devote our lives to anything un-fun?!?

So, I started The Happy Writer, a blog where I shared ideas and insights about being in charge of your own happiness. And now I bring that blog to you in print!

This e-book contains Happy Writer blog posts that were written by me, as well as over three thousand words of new material never before published on the blog, so there’s something for former blog readers and new readers alike. I’ve made some updates to previous posts, making them a little more book-y, a little less blog-y.

Though I write from the point of view of a novelist, I think this applies to any writer...screenwriters, poets, nonfiction book and article writers. All writers can use some inspiration and motivation to write happier.

You won’t find here any kind of magic spell to obtain an agent or get a publishing contract, and I can’t write your book or article for you. These are all things you can do yourself. I also won’t give you advice about what will be the next hot topic or how to get your book on the New York Times Bestseller list. If I had a crystal ball, I’d seek these answers for myself.

I can show you that you have the choice in how you look at anything, including writing and publishing. In this book and future books in The Happy Writer book series, you’ll find ways to be Happy as you work toward publication or building the career of your dreams. I will show you how to focus on the positive, unleash your creativity by being happy with what you can control, and how to release what you can’t control so you’ll be a happier writer and a generally more optimistic person.

Nothing would make me happier than to have you remember why you wanted to write in the first place and to find the joy in it again!
So, please join me in the adventure of becoming a Happy Writer! You’ve got nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Yours in Happy Writing,

Shannon
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**Happy Writers**

*Wanted: Writers struggling to stay positive as they pursue a writing career. Must be willing to look at things a little differently while seeking to find the Happy in writing again.*

**Picture This**

You sit down to write and you’re excited to get started. You may not know exactly what will flow from your fingers today, but it doesn’t matter, because you love writing, creating stories and characters so real you feel you know them. You’re doing what you love and having fun doing it!

You have goals -- stars you’re reaching for -- but the fact that you haven’t reached them yet is okay, because you’re Happy. Writing makes you feel good, even when it’s not perfect. Even when it’s hard.

Every step on the journey takes you on a new adventure...maybe not exactly what you pictured, maybe not on the timetable you once thought you’d follow, but you go along joyfully because you realize that loving what you’re doing and being Happy is the most important thing.

If this sounds like a writing life you want to experience, I hope to help you with that. Welcome to The Happy Writer!

**Two Things Writers Have In Common**

After attending a weekend writers’ conference, I sifted through my observations of how the conference went. My favorite thing about writing conferences is being with people who understand the writing life. Together we laugh and cry, celebrate and commiserate. We’re brought closer by all we have in common, no matter what we write or where we are in the process.

Over that weekend, as with every other conference I’d been to, there had been ups and downs, complaints and praise. The highs (great workshops, awe-inspiring keynote speakers) made us feel wonderful, made us all remember why we write in the first place.

But the lows (pitch sessions that didn’t go the way we wanted, less-than-stellar industry news)...the lows dragged us down, had us contemplating hanging up our pens for good, wondering why we put ourselves through the agony.

When I got home, I couldn’t decide how I felt about it all. I wanted to write. I was excited about
the book I was working on, but, at the same time, I was having a hard time mustering enthusiasm about it all.

When I thought about it, though, I realized that writers have two things in common, no matter where we are in our writing careers:

1. We all have something about writing we feel un-Happy about.
2. We all want to be inspired, which makes us Happy about the writing.

Sound familiar? A writing career is your dream, but there are little (or big) things that make writing un-fun for you? Do you long to be inspired?

Do you seek out situations (like conferences, writing retreats, coffee dates with other writers) that inspire you and keep you going on those days when you’d rather curl up in the fetal position and forget it all?

If so, you’re not alone. The rest of us are right there, feeling the same feelings, no matter whether we’re just getting started, have a couple published books on our shelves, or have had a taste of the New York Times Bestseller List.

**IDENTIFY YOUR UN-HAPPY**

Thankfully, wishing to be inspired isn’t a problem. The problem is the things that make us unhappy about writing. Because those things can stifle our creativity. So how do we get rid of those things?

They say that the first step to change is identifying what you want to change. So, ask yourself a simple question: What’s blocking your writing happiness?

Take a second and jot a couple things down. I’ll wait.

Here’s a few things you might have listed that are keeping you from being a Happy Writer:

- Not being published.
- Not having an agent.
- Not having as much time to write as you’d like.
- Not being taken seriously as a writer by your family/friends.
- Not having a dedicated writing space.
- Being lousy at writing query letters.
Notice a pattern? Some things we can do something about...like learning to write a fabulous query letter. But I bet a lot of things you’re unhappy about are external, i.e. out of your control. We can’t control when an agent will agree to represent us or when we will get a publishing contract. We can’t control how our family and friends treat our desire to write.

Another thing our unhappinesses may have in common is that they are things.

In the TED video “Plug Into Your Hard-Wired Happiness” Srikumar S. Rao, Ph.D., an executive, writer and life coach reminds us, “Anything we can get, we can un-get.” This would include health, wealth, a great job, an agent...even a publishing contract.

So here’s an eye-opening question: If our happiness hinges on having something external to us, out of our control, what happens if we lose it? Does that mean we can’t be happy then?

**ANOTHER WAY TO LOOK AT IT**

What we can control is how we look at things. The internal. We have sole control over whether we choose to focus on the happy things about writing or the things that make us miserable.

Sound nuts? It’s true! You may not be able to control the thoughts running through your head at any given moment, but you can control whether you choose to hold on to those thoughts or let them go and choose a happier thought.

And if you consistently choose happy thoughts, pretty soon you’ll develop a Happy Habit.

That’s what this book is about. Developing the Happy Habit. Choosing better thoughts, focusing on the reasons we love writing and, in the process, freeing our creativity.

Go back up near the top of this section and re-read the section called Picture This. If that’s the kind of writer you want to be, I hope you’ll join me on this journey to become a Happy Writer.
CREATING HAPPY THOUGHTS

In 2003, I decided my husband shouldn’t be the only one in the family with a Jeep Wrangler. I figured it was time, since I would wait until he got home from work so I could drive it to the grocery store with the top down (even though the store was busier then, so it would take me twice as long to shop).

So, I bought my beautiful yellow SUNNEE (because, you know, It’s Always SUNNEE in My Jeep). Suddenly there were yellow Jeeps everywhere! I’d never noticed how many until I had my own. Really, there were no more than before I owned one, but now they were in the forefront of my mind, so they stood out more.

This applies to just about any area of your life. The more you think about something, the more you notice it. For example, the whole point of a gratitude journal is that, by practicing gratitude with regularity, you begin to recognize more things for which to be grateful.

Your thoughts about writing work the same way. When you begin to practice developing the Happy Habit of looking for more to be Happy about in your writing, it’ll become almost a game to find things to be Happy about.

You’ll notice other’s successes and celebrate them, instead of comparing yourself to them (because their success means it’s possible to succeed -- good news for you!). You’ll be open to new writing processes, find joy in trying new things, even if they eventually don’t work for you. You’ll let go of feeling unhappy about what you don’t have and focus on what you do.

You’ll feel better and more joyful about writing. And isn’t that why most of us became writers in the first place? Because we thought it would make us Happy?

CREATE HAPPINESS
What if you could “write” your thoughts the way you write stories?

Sonja Luybomirsky, social psychologist and author of The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want, says in a Psychology Today article, “You shouldn’t just ‘pursue’ happiness – you should ‘construct’ or ‘create’ it yourself.” (“Is it Possible to Become Lastingly Happier?”)

Maybe it seems like a lot of work to have to create your own happiness. It would be far easier to just wait around for things to happen that you think will make you happy, like getting a publishing contract. In the meantime, though, while you’re twiddling your thumbs, waiting for
happiness to come find you, you’re left with frustration, boredom and, in extreme cases, the complete inability to function because you’re waiting.

You have nothing to lose by creating your own happiness. If you’re happy because you have things to be happy about, you’re happy. If you’re happy simply because you choose to find things to be happy about, you’re still happy. The end effect is the same...you are happy.

Except the latter option doesn’t rely on things or circumstances to make you happy.

OUT WITH THE OLD
I mentioned in the last chapter that we can’t always control the thoughts that flit through our heads moment by moment, but we can choose to let the negative ones go free and decide to think on happier thoughts instead.

I was in the middle of writing a tough scene one day. It was more emotional than anything I’d ever written before, and I wasn’t doing a very good job of it. My frustration built until I was ready to scream.

My thoughts sounded a lot like this: “Why am I even trying?! I’m nowhere near a good enough writer to try to tackle this kind of scene! I should just give it up and write something easier.”

The problem with thoughts like these is not that we think them, but that we think them often enough that we start to believe them.

Michael Neill, author of Supercoach: 10 Secrets to Transform Anyone’s Life, says, “If you let a negative thought pass through your head without giving it a second thought (or third, or fourth, or even fiftieth), it will have no impact on your life. But if you get hooked by it, dwell on it, make it important, and start to think about it and claim it for your own, then you’ll become subject to its inevitable effects.”

What if, instead, we turn away the negative thoughts -- essentially show them the door -- to make room for new and better thoughts that make us Happy?

We can do this by just noticing that we are thinking a thought. Even say it out loud to yourself (but not in a public place, because you might be hauled off by white-coated men). “I notice that I’m thinking I suck as a writer.”

It doesn’t seem like such a true statement when you look at it objectively, does it? It’s amazing how well this works. Identify it as just a thought you had, and you automatically disconnect
from it a little bit. Step back and see that the thought has no control over you. It isn’t a true measure of your ability as a writer.

As long as you don’t latch on to a thought and assign some emotion to it, it will just keep moving, and you can get back to writing.

This is just part of the process of choosing to be a Happy Writer, but it’s a start. Once we start to notice our negative thoughts as temporary, with no power over us, we can begin to change those thoughts.

How about, for the next 24 hours, practice this: Notice your thoughts, especially the negative ones. Acknowledge that you have a particular thought. Then let it go. Give it a try! What do you have to lose?
**HAPPY REFRAming**

So, did you try the experiment of noticing your negative thoughts about writing, looking at them objectively and then letting them go? How did it work for you?

Don’t forget a lot of this stuff takes practice. For all of us...including me. I may call myself The Happy Writer, but I have to work at it.

So once we **have mastered** do our best at setting aside negative thoughts that push their way into our heads, how do we replace them with positive, happy thoughts? It’s not as easy as it sounds and usually takes more than just positive thinking.

Positive thinking has been around for a while and includes things like affirmations -- repeating something positive over and over again -- in theory, until you begin to believe it. This *can* work, don’t get me wrong. But it’s more complicated than that.

The problem with positive thinking is you can *say*, “I’m a fabulous writer” over and over and over until your head spins, but it doesn’t change your *feelings*, if your feelings are, at the moment, “I suck.” The most important thing about changing your mind is changing your feelings.

**REFRAMING**

A better way to replace those negative thoughts is called reframing. Reframing is essentially changing your interpretation of a belief you hold or your understanding of a situation (looking at it through a “new frame”), so that you see it in a more positive manner. It’s what we’ll most often be using to point out the ways in which some “bad things” can really be good things.

I was fired once from a doctor’s office job. I thought it was the worst thing that could happen! I’d never been fired before, had done a great job, and saw no way this could be anything but a complete disaster.

Fast forward six weeks, I was newly employed at the local hospital and remained there for 14 years! I expanded my job skills, earned more money than I could have at the doctor’s office and I soon realized that firing was the best thing that had ever happened to me. I completely reframed how I thought about the episode.

You can also use reframing to rethink how you feel about a task. For instance, you can think, “I hate *cleaning* the bathroom,” or “I love *having* a clean bathroom.” Focusing on the end result and the *feeling* you are working toward instead of the task itself can get you through that unpleasant
task with a better attitude.

Reframing works because it’s not events themselves that make you happy or sad but your interpretation of the events as good or bad, important or unimportant, etc. The trick is to do the reframing before you necessarily have proof that something is for the best, offers you better opportunities, etc.

**Writers Reframing**
Here’s how it might work for us writers:

**Current frame:**

Event: Your top choice agent rejects your manuscript stating it “wasn’t for her.”

Resulting belief: “I was sure she would love me! I must be a horrible writer!”

Consequences: You wallow in depression and refuse to send the manuscript to another agent for fear of being rejected again.

**After reframing:**

Event: Your top choice agent rejects your manuscript stating it “wasn’t for her.”

Resulting belief reframed: “Thank goodness she didn’t agree to take me on as a client with a book she didn’t truly love! An agent should be a writer’s biggest cheerleader and most loyal fan, so I’m going to keep trying to find the agent who will love and admire my work.”

Consequences: You keep on joyfully writing while researching and querying other agents trying to find just the right fit.

Or

**Current frame:**

“I hate writing elevator pitches! Who can narrow down their story to 1 or 2 sentences?!”

**After reframing:**
“I love having an elevator pitch handy when I’m asked about my book. It give me confidence and makes me look professional, prepared, and connected with my story!”

See how the reframing worked? The event/task didn’t change, just your perception of it, and, as a result, the emotions you feel go from negative to positive. I’m sure you can imagine which frame would best help you maintain your Happy Writer membership.

Reframing can take you from “I can’t write a query to save my life” to “I’m still learning how to write a great query, using all the resources I can find.” Or from “I’ll never be as great a romance novelist as Nora Roberts” to “There are a lot of great romance novelists out there and, if I keep trying, I’ll figure out where I can shine.”

**HOW TO REFRAME**

So how do you reframe a situation? Try asking yourself some questions:

- Could this mean something else?
- Does the problem really lie with the task or the way I feel about it?
- What is the end result I’m working for?
- What can I learn from this situation?
- Could there be hidden opportunities behind this event?
- Is there a solution to this I might be able to find?
- How would someone else see this event?
- What did I do well in this situation?
- What about this situation might I look back on in the future and laugh about?
- What might you tell your best friend if they were in the same situation? (Presumably *not* that she was a horrible writer just because her manuscript was rejected.)
- What would [insert name of most admired writer] do?

Each of these questions can aid in helping you reframe the event/task. As you practice, think of your own questions that help you reframe.

One caveat to all this, don’t use reframing to make yourself feel better about bad habits or behavior. It’s never okay to reframe your thinking to justify treating someone badly or being unprofessional in a situation that calls for professionalism.

**THE “BAD” NEWS**

Reframing isn’t always easy. You have to be willing to let go of the old thoughts, and there will be times when you want to just wallow in whininess. I give you an hour. An hour of self-pity and mental flogging of your perceived inadequacies and then back to work. Reframe, rethink,
choose a different way of looking at things. No matter how hard it is.

Why go through all this effort? Because we’d rather be Happy Writers than sad, depressed, tense writers!

If you need something more scientific than my word to convince you that it’s worth the effort, Sonja Luybomirsky mentions in the Psychology Today article “Happiness Breeds Success...and Money” that, “Not only do creativity and productivity...make people happy, but happier people have been found to be more creative and productive.” What writer doesn’t want to be more creative and productive?

Sounds win-win to me.
THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF BEING POSITIVE

I learned about the exercise of Positive Aspects a few years ago. I don’t remember where I read about it, but it’s helped me more than once since then to see that there are good things about just about any given situation, even if it looks bleak. I recently read that there’s even a scientific term for finding the good in bad situations: Benefit-finding.

If psychologists study it, it must mean something, right?

We’ll talk about Positive Aspects regarding many different topics, but today I want to talk about the Positive Aspects of Being Positive.

POSITIVE ASPECTS PRINCIPLES
There’s nothing too tough about this exercise. It basically consists of one step: Make a list of all the positive things about any situation that you feel negatively about.

Need to do a particular chore that you simply don’t want to do (like cleaning the garage that hasn’t been cleaned in 15 years)? Make a list of Positive Aspects of getting it done:

1. The ability to park your car in the garage again.
2. You could sell some of the stuff to make money.
3. You’ll be able to find your Christmas decorations for the first time in 2 years.

Keep listing the Positive Aspects of cleaning the garage until you can’t think of any more. By the time you’re done, cleaning out the garage might not look so bad after all.

Facing an upcoming visit with in-laws who drive you to drink? Try making a list of Positive Aspects about them beforehand.

1. They’ll want to spend time with their grandkids, so you and hubby might be able to sneak in a night on the town.
2. They’ll be here in time to help you clean the garage and your mother-in-law LOVES to clean.
3. They really do mean well, even when their criticisms make you contemplate moving without leaving a forwarding address.

Feel any better about the upcoming visit? (Some things will require really digging deep.)
Now that you’ve got the idea, apply it to writing. For example: What are the positive aspects of having a job when you’d rather be writing full time? (Steady income, the opportunity to have experiences you might be able to use in a book someday, etc.)

So what’s the point of all this Positive Aspect stuff? Making a list of the positive things about not having an agent isn’t going to get you an agent. But it might make you look at it in a different light, which, in turn, could let you feel happier about not having what you want right now.

And what benefit is there to you feeling happier and more positive about your writing career at whatever stage you may be?

Well, let’s look at some of the Positive Aspects of Being Positive:

1. “Happiness leads to success, well-being leads to inspiration, and that success and inspiration become the basis for creating an ever more wonderful life.” - Michael Neill, in the introduction to Supercoach: 10 Secrets to Transform Anyone’s Life.

2. “Positivity can do more for you than simply make you feel good. It can broaden your mind and open your heart. Your moments of heartfelt gratitude, joy, and love can transform your life for the better by building your resources and strengths.” - Barbara L. Fredrickson, Ph.D, in Positivity: Groundbreaking Research Reveals How to Embrace the Hidden Strength of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity, and Thrive.

3. “The more your brain picks up on the positive, the more you’ll expect this trend to continue, and so the more optimistic you’ll be. And optimism, it turns out, is a tremendously powerful predictor of work performance.” - Shawn Achor, in The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work.

4. “In becoming happier, we bolster our feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem; we come to believe that we are worthy human beings, deserving of respect.” - Sonja Lyubomirsky, in The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want.

5. “Whoever is happy will make others happy, too.” - Mark Twain.

6. “Being positive feels a whole lot better than being negative!” - The Happy Writer

How do you think being happier about your writing might improve things for you?
Give the Positive Aspects exercise a try. Think of something about writing that tends to bring you down and write down all the positive aspects you can think of. You might have to work at it!
If you could simply reprogram yourself to be a happier writer, would you?

The title makes my topic sound kind of cold and unfeeling. Like -- in the manner of a computer or a robot -- a writer might be reprogrammed to behave in a certain way.

But actually, I think the concept might be kind of liberating. After all, if I think about trying to “make” myself a happier writer, it seems like a lot of work. All those thoughts I have to change. All the effort I would need to put into diligently keeping track of my thoughts and making sure they stay on track. Lots o’ work.

I was watching (the first half of) a video one day called “Reprogramming Your Brain To Be Happier,” by Shawn Achor, an expert in positive psychology and author of *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work*, and realized it might not be as difficult as I thought. In fact, the idea of “reprogramming” with minimal effort sounds like a great idea if you ask me!

The principle is that, in order to retrain the brain to look for and expect positive things to happen, you spend no more than about five minutes every morning writing down three things you’re grateful for (or feel positive about). I imagine it would work just as well picking three things within or outside of your writing world.

Achor says of people who routinely search for the negatives in any situation, “What they’re training their brain to do is to scan the world, not for the stresses, hassles, and complaints first, but actually training their brain, like an athlete, to look for the things that they are grateful for.”

After about three weeks, you can actually retrain your brain to see the positives automatically.

Are you willing to invest five minutes a day to reprogram your writer’s brain to look for the Happy stuff?
**HAPPY GOAL SETTING**


Often resolutions are long forgotten by the end of January. Ever been to a Weight Watchers meeting at the beginning of the year? It’s a crazy madhouse! Newly committed dieters everywhere. By the end of the month, though, things are quieting down, there are seats available again and, by February, everything has generally settled back to “normal” as people drift away, resolutions forgotten. Only the die-hards are left.

I have always used the terms goal-setting and resolutions interchangeably. The problem I have with goal-setting/resolutions has to do with the SMART acronym.

As a model for setting goals, I totally agree with the SMART method.

Goals should be **Specific**. Say you’re going to write Novel X, not “a novel” because it lacks focus.

It should be **Measurable**. Saying, “I resolve to write” can’t be measured in the same way resolving to write “a chapter a week” can be measured.

**Realistic**, absolutely! Stating you resolve to write four full-length novels this year when you’ve never written one before, is just asking for failure.

**Timed** is also necessary. If you don’t set yourself a time limit, you can fiddle around forever saying you’re “working” on your goal/resolution.

The part of the system that often hangs me up is: **Attainable**. Yes, setting an attainable (by you) goal is vital. You should always set goals within your control, because a goal like “getting published” (which hinges on the editor/publisher, even if you do everything correctly), is completely out of your control. If you then don’t achieve that goal by the end of the year, you’re left feeling unsuccessful and unhappy, even if you accomplished a great deal toward making that goal happen!

This truth, in practice, makes this the hardest part of resolution/goal-setting for me. Because I don’t want to look at it that way. I tend to like looking at goals as “Where do I want to be in one year? Five years? Ten years?” I want to be able to say, “I would like to have a book contract within the year” and “I would like to be a full-time writer in five years.”
But that doesn’t fit the “attainable” part of the SMART model. That doesn’t make the model wrong, it just means I need to figure out where my thinking is off.

A DIFFERENT WAY TO LOOK AT IT
To figure out where I go wrong, first I looked up the difference between resolutions and goals:

Resolution:

1. a resolve or determination: to make a firm resolution to do something.

2. the act of resolving or determining upon an action or course of action, method, procedure, etc.

Goal:

1. the end toward which effort is directed.

Ah! So, that’s where I make my error. I think correctly about goals; it’s resolutions I have wrong, getting them confused with goals.

The goal is the end. What you want to ultimately occur. The goal is the end toward which effort is directed (best with no time limit, as that is out of your control)...but resolution is the effort, the course of action.

Put all together, New Year’s resolutions are the goal-directed actions that I choose to incorporate into my daily life for the coming year.

Which means I should have both goals and resolutions. My vision board (more on vision boards in another chapter) can reflect my goals of being a self-supporting writer, that I want to write women’s fiction and young adult novels, and that I want to give back to the writing community as a speaker and workshop leader. There are no real time limits to these goals, as much of the timing of achievement of them is out of my control.

However, totally within my control are the resolutions.

Looking at the steps I need to take to reach those goals, I can set resolutions (yearly, or more often, as I take stock of my progress and revise my procedures throughout the year) of what my goal-directed actions will be. For instance, I may resolve to devote one hour daily toward my current work in progress or that I will write one chapter a week, submit X number of proposals
to my agent per year, etc.

My resolutions fit the SMART model, where my goals are the stars I’m shooting for.

**The Importance of Resolutions**

Whether you set resolutions only once a year or reevaluate and recommit on a monthly/weekly basis, I’ve found, to be a Happy Writer, that the resolutions are more important than the goals. The resolutions, the daily steps taken on that journey toward the ultimate destination/goal/dream, are what make me a Happy Writer.

In the introduction of *Supercoach: 10 Secrets to Transform Anyone’s Life*, Neill says, “One of the reasons you want what you want is that you believe it will in some way enhance your experience of being alive. But as you may have already begun to realize, if you really want to have a more enjoyable life, reaching your goals is not enough. You’re also going to have to find a more enjoyable way of getting there.”

The above quote was pretty profound for me. Goals are so far-reaching, so out of my control, that they tend to be almost a detriment to my motivation. I often found myself looking at my goals and thinking, “Great! I want to be a self-supporting writer -- I busted my rear yesterday writing 20 pages on my manuscript and today I’m no closer to that goal than I was then. And I could write 20 more today and won’t be any closer tomorrow.”

Feeling anxious and tense about not being at my goal yet makes the process much less fun.

This led to my next revelation: Getting to the goal is less important than making sure I have a good time getting there.

So how do you make the resolutions more enjoyable -- and consequently improve the chances you will actually keep them beyond the first month of the new year? Choose to look at them differently of course. Look at them as the smaller steps you resolve to take toward your bigger goals. Then apply the SMART model to them to make sure you’re on target.

If you make only one resolution (at New Year’s or right now), look at the first definition of resolution listed above, and make it this one:

*I resolve to find ways to be happy in my writing life, to free my creativity by letting go of the tension I feel about my yet-to-be-accomplished goals and the things I have no control over.*
WHEN GOOD GOALS GO BAD

We’re still talking about goals, because there’s really a lot to say about goals. Both good and bad. (Note: I’m going to use goals and resolutions a bit interchangeably, but I’m talking about the weekly stuff, so really the resolutions.)

So, I have this friend. For the sake of privacy, let’s call her...Not-Erin.

Not-Erin is one of the most driven writers I know. She sets production goals for herself every week and meets them every week. (Did I mention she sets and keeps these for herself? When I set goals for myself, my brain mostly treats them more like gentle suggestions...take ‘em or leave ‘em.)

But not Not-Erin. She sets goals and meets them.

Now, lest you think Not-Erin doesn’t do anything else but write, I’ll share what the rest of her schedule looks like:

- Full-time job, including lots of take-home work.
- Two writers’ group meetings a month.
- Regular exercise.
- Taking care of her home.
- Social life.
- Fiancé who lives on the other side of the state, which requires long road trips every weekend to see him.

Oh, and did I mention she’s planning a WEDDING?

So one day, Not-Erin e-mails me freaking out that she’s not going to get her 12 pages written this week. Why? Because she has work, a work meeting, three meetings for various wedding planning events, a writers’ meeting, needs to make sure she keeps eating right and exercising (for her sanity), and she needs to drive three hours to the east side of the state on Friday.

There’s no way she’ll get all of this done.

Oh, she had also promised herself to finish researching agents and get several queries sent out this week, because how is she ever supposed to get published if she doesn’t get the queries in the mail?!
It took me a minute to catch my breath after reading her e-mail, because that was just too damn much stuff to try to cram into one week, and I was tried just reading it.

Now goals are great. We’ve already established that I’m a fan. They point us in the right direction, keep us focused on the “prize” and give us a benchmark of our progress. Everyone should set goals/make resolutions.

**Shoulding Yourself**

Everyone should set goals, unless we turn those goals into “shoulds.” I should be doing X. I should be writing today. I should have that chapter done by now. I should have my first draft done already.

Because, along with those “shoulds” come the silent add-on that makes us feel bad about ourselves: “I should have accomplished this, but since I haven’t I must be a great big loser.”

Admit it. You’ve said this to yourself before. Maybe under your breath. But you’ve said it, or thought it...that you should be doing such and such.

Because we use “shoulds” to punish ourselves, don’t we?

Psychologist Albert Ellis, Ph.D., calls it “MUSTERbation.” Ellis says, “...musterbation is evil and pernicious......If you didn’t musterbate, then you wouldn’t awfulize, terribilize, catastrophize, say ‘I can’t stand it,’ and put yourself down. If you only stuck with, ‘I’d like very much to do well, but I never have to,’ you wouldn’t then disturb yourself.”

When a goal turns into a “should” it becomes something we make ourselves feel guilty about not accomplishing...no matter that there are other things going on in our lives, sometimes really important things, like taking care of sick kids, family vacations, work projects, and wedding planning.

If we are only working toward a goal because we think we “should,” the dynamic of the thing changes, going from something we look forward to doing, take pride in working on and will feel great about accomplishing, to something we are only doing because we should. Suddenly it’s an obligation.

A Happy Writer doesn’t write out of obligation.

**Getting Real**

So how to get back to Happy Writing when your goals and resolutions, on top of the rest of
your life, become overwhelming?

First, recognize what you’re doing. You can tell you are shoulding yourself by the guilty feelings that come along with it. The guilt compounds the lack-of-time problem because if we feel guilty about something, we tend to try to bury that guilt in order to stop feeling it. Most often, we bury guilt by procrastinating. You can’t think about what you should be doing if you’re mindlessly plowing through endless levels of Candy Crush or Angry Birds.

Once you notice that trying to meet your goals has become guilt-inducing instead of a fun source of pride, you need to decide if your goals are realistic for the present circumstances. Just because you have always made it your goal to write 12 pages a week, every week, without fail, you may be setting yourself up for failure with that very resolution. You need to take stock and reevaluate.

Make a list of all you have to do during your week. Include the basics like your job, self-care and feeding your kids, along with anything that might be temporary...out of town relatives here for the week or wedding planning, for instance.

Now see if your writing goals fit realistically into that schedule this week. I’m not asking you to give up your goals for good. Just evaluate this week. If there is something temporary in your life right now, you may need to adjust what you can accomplish and still remain sane.

Last, make the choice to stop feeling guilty. Guilty writers are not Happy Writers. If you’re writing out of guilt, with your mind elsewhere, you’re not going to be at your creative best.

Now, this re-assessment of goals isn’t carte blanche to screw around and then say, “Oh, well, I didn’t make my resolutions this week.” It doesn’t mean you can overfill your social calendar or procrastinate to the detriment of your goals. Sometimes you must protect your writing time as sacred. There are times it can and should be your priority.

In Not-Erin’s case, though, I reminded her that her wedding was a one-time event. A once-in-a-lifetime experience that she could only make special by devoting time to it. Instead, when she was wedding planning, she felt guilty about not writing, and if she took time to write, she felt guilty about all the things she wasn’t getting done for the wedding.

It took all the joy out of both the writing and the wedding planning.

She basically had to make a choice -- to relax her writing goals and enjoy the time she did have (even if it was only a few stolen moments here and there), or continue to stress herself out with what she couldn’t do. The wedding was only going to happen once. It was a finite project with a
firm deadline. Her writing would still be there after the ceremony, and she would be in a much better place to enjoy it.

Thankfully, Not-Erin made the right choice (after a little reminder that if she happened to sell a book before the wedding, she’d have to add *that* to her to-do list, which practically made her hyperventilate). Her choice was to revise her goals/resolutions to a more manageable level and to relax her expectations of just how much time she had. Reminding herself that it was temporary helped, and she found some of her tension dissipating.

She was able to be a Happy Writer.

Fast forward: A few months later, Not-Erin and her fiancé said “We do” and began the rest of their lives together, and Not-Erin reevaluated her writing goals once again to fit into her new life.

Happy Writer Achievement unlocked!
NO GOAL NEW YEAR

My writing group and I have a pow-wow each December to talk about what we want for the following year. We talk about what we liked and didn’t like about the past year and what we want to do differently for the next year and how we are going to do it. We evaluate our long-term goals and set resolutions as I discussed earlier.

One year, the overarching theme seemed to be that we all wanted to have more fun. Each in our own way, of course. One of us wanted to try new writing-related things. One wanted to relax and have more faith in things working out so she wouldn’t be so stressed about her writing. One of us wanted to stop caring what everyone else thought of her and her writing and just write what she wanted and what gave her joy. One of us wanted bits and pieces of what all of the rest of us wanted combined.

What I wanted was more creativity and more fun...mainly in my writing, but also in my whole life.

Not that my life isn’t ever fun. But, for the most part, that’s not how I would describe my general state of being. I turn a lot of things into “work” that could be fun, which stifles my creativity...and then I wonder why I don’t want to do those things.

One of those things is writing.

GETTING HONEST HERE

Writing used to be a lot of fun for me. I thought about it all the time, had plots and scenes and character emotions running through my head constantly. I lay awake at night or woke up early with great ideas I just had to get on paper right away. I had more story ideas than I knew what to do with.

I missed those days. It had been a while since writing was really fun for me. I had too much other stuff in my head...day job stuff, family stuff, writing stuff that felt like work...so when I sat down, even with the express purpose of writing, I could barely think about it. I felt stuck and stifled and completely without creativity.

As we talked that year, one of my friends, Cathy Yardley of Rock Your Writing (who is both a fabulous friend and horrible friend at the same time because she asks really, REALLY hard questions that make my brain hurt), said (paraphrased), “I don’t want to make goals this year. I want to decide how I want to FEEL this year and figure out how to do that.”
Whoa.

It hit me that that was exactly what I needed! I could set all kinds of goals...write a book, find an agent, write X number of posts a month for Happy Writer...and none of those goals would matter, even if I met them, if I didn’t have fun while doing it.

The whole principle behind The Happy Writer is that you have to be happy right where you are in order to be happy wherever you find yourself someday.

If I want to be a Happy Writer when I publish again, I need to be happy now.

Saying these things to others and applying them to yourself are entirely different animals. (Ever heard that phrase, “Physician, heal thyself?” Yeah, I should say, “Teacher, teach thyself.”)

**WHAT DO YOU WANT TO FEEL?**
Before this whole conversation, I already knew I wanted that year to be the Year of Creativity for me. But this conversation made me realize why I want that. I wanted the Year of Creativity to bring back the fun of writing for me.

I wanted to look forward to sitting down and writing. I wanted to think about my characters and puzzle out their stories and think outside the plot box. I wanted to smile with delight when I talked about writing again. I wanted to read books that made me smile and wanted to play with my words and my worlds.

I could easily see a major benefit to this. I would want to write. Which meant I would write more. So my creativity would affect my productivity. Which, in turn, would make me smile more and have more fun. It’s a win-win situation, all with no resolutions except to write and fall in love with it again.

In the month after we started this little experiment, we all experimented with different things: Using metaphors to look at things differently, writing out of order, planning writing playdates, thinking outside the box and, as I got back to working on my current manuscript, I decided not to limit myself to just one story. I worked on whichever project made me feel the most creative and happy on any given day. And it was fun!

Even a month in, this experiment was working fabulously. We had all been sooo productive! For my part, I finished up an edit and submitted to a publisher for the first time in several years. All because we realized that if we’re not having fun, if we weren’t Happy, all the goals/resolutions in the world weren’t going to make it so.
If this resonates with you at all, maybe you want to give it a try? Maybe not. You might be really good with goals and resolutions. Maybe you choose your New Year’s resolutions and achieve them easily or find that they keep you on track. That’s totally okay! You can still make resolutions and decide how you want to feel this year.

There are lots of feelings you might choose to focus on for the year, so give it some thought. Do you want to feel more relaxed, more energized, more creative (like I did)? Do you want to feel more professional, more focused?

Once you identify how you want to feel in the coming year, make plans for how you are going to achieve this feeling and then have fun with it!
**HAPPY JOURNEY**

So we’ve talked about goals and resolutions. I hope that you’ve started to think about your goals...and the resolutions that will be the baby steps to help you reach those goals.

But I want to talk now about other ways we sometimes let goals get in the way of our happiness.

It might be hard to believe, but goals can actually be a big problem for writers, as, quite often, those goals tend to be really far from where we stand right now. Getting an agent. Getting published by that major magazine. Hitting the New York Times Bestseller List. All are perfectly acceptable long-term goals...as long as we remember to be Happy along the way.

The problem comes when we focus on the achievement of that long-term goal as the source of happiness with our writing careers. Then we just make ourselves miserable.

Imagine you’re taking a road trip Miami to San Francisco. You’re so excited to get there! Your family lives there, and you’ll be sight-seeing and shopping and eating amazing food and walking the Golden Gate Bridge. You just know it is going to make you Happy to be there!

So, you get in the car and you start driving. It’s going to take you a week to drive cross-country.

By the end of the first day, you’re only a seventh of the way there, and you sit in your motel room that night, looking at all the beautiful brochures of San Fran and get teary-eyed because you’re still so far from your destination. You go to bed sad and depressed because you really want to be in San Francisco already, not in some boring hotel in Alabama.

The next day you get up and get started again. You’re feeling excited again...you’re on your way to San Francisco! As you drive the long, tedious drive, visions of the Fisherman’s Wharf flit through your mind. Oh, and twisty Lombard Street! That’ll be such fun!

In the meantime, what’s outside your car window right now is completely lost on you. You miss Texas completely and all the sights you could see in Albuquerque are merely a blur in your rear-view mirror as you speed toward San Francisco. And each night when you stop to sleep, all you do is mope about the fact that you aren’t there yet. Maybe you’ll never get there! What if your car breaks down? What if the highway is closed for construction? All this driving, all this work, and all this time, and you feel like you may not reach California ever.

Get the picture yet? You may have set the goal to get to San Francisco, but the trip between
Miami and San Fran is so wrought with misery and depression about not being there yet that you don’t enjoy any of the journey!

And once you do get to San Francisco, you may still not enjoy it because your mood has sunk so low over the last week that you can barely function. All you notice is the fog and that you’re sore and exhausted from the long car ride instead of enjoying the San Fran sights you were so looking forward to.

Are you getting how this could parallel to your road trip to publication? If you spend your entire journey being depressed that you’re not there yet, by the time you do get there, your bad attitude is pretty well ingrained, and you’re very likely to find something else to be unhappy about quite quickly.

**THE WRITING ROAD TRIP**

I think writing/publishing may be a career choice that is just more susceptible to this kind of all-or-nothing thinking. Writers, misguidedly, tend to attach our self-worth to being published, so as long we’re still chasing that goal (and our self-worth), we have to really work at staying positive.

Srikumar Rao, Ph.D., author of *Happiness at Work: Be Resilient, Motivated, and Successful - No Matter What* has a fabulous video on TED called “Plug Into Your Hard-Wired Happiness.” In it, he talks about how we tend to focus on the model of “If...then.” This struck me as very much the case with writers.

“If I get published...then I will be happy.”

“If this agent offers to represent me when I send him this query letter...then everything will be perfect!”

The problem really comes when we reach the goal and discover that we’re only happy briefly, that the “high” of accomplishing the goal wears off, and we’re back to looking for the next goal down the road to “make us happy.”

We might recognize that this is a flawed way of thinking...but instead of changing the way we think, we tend to just change the “if,” hoping that if we just pick the wrong goal to make us happy, then choosing that right goal will cause us to be a Happy Writer.

The problem, though, isn’t with the goals. The problem is forgetting everything that comes between where you are and the goal. It’s being so focused on San Francisco, that you miss Albuquerque and
Wouldn’t it be better to be happy *while* working toward your goal than to work toward your goal hoping that it will make you happier?

Dr. Rao suggests not investing in the goal (the outcome), but investing in the *process*. Focusing on the goal is great, but investing in it, thinking that goal is the key to your happiness, is just asking for failure.

“Focus on the outcome [goal] only to the extent that it gives you direction,” says Dr. Rao.

That way, if you succeed, great! If you don’t succeed (yet), you can focus on a new outcome and keep enjoying the journey. Because you are still finding joy/happiness in the process.

**BUILDING SUCCESS STEP BY STEP**

A better way to make this a Happy Writing Journey is to choose to celebrate your successes, no matter how tiny. Again, in the Happy Goal Setting chapter, we talked about the difference between goals and resolutions, goals being the bigger “someday” outcome we reach for, and resolutions being the goal-directed, day-by-day actions we take to move toward those goals.

Resolutions, being actionable, can be great motivators toward reminding us that our day-to-day journey can be just as satisfying as reaching the goal. Every action you take, every small step accomplished, proves you are successful, even not having reached the goal yet. Every word, every sentence, every chapter. Every query letter perfected and mailed. Every contact made. Every opportunity embraced. All of it is success! All of it is reason to celebrate SUCCESS!!

And, if every day is a success (even if you just wrote one sentence), your journey will be successful and happy no matter where you end up or when you get there, right?

I suggest writing your successes down, no matter how small. Keep a list, a notebook, put sticky notes all over your computer monitor or bathroom mirror:

“I wrote an AWESOME outline for an article today!”

“I pinpointed my main character’s flaws and strengths today!”

“I wrote the BEST SENTENCE EVER today!”

Read these over (and over and over and over), reminding yourself that every small step should
be savored and enjoyed. You *are* a success no matter where you are in the journey.

So set the goal, make the resolutions, then put the focus on what you can do *today* to work toward that goal -- and have fun doing it!
**HAPPY VISIONING**

Being a Happy Writer is a vision, if you will. A vision of who you want to be and how you want to feel about your writing, about the publishing world, about yourself.

It isn’t always easy, though, to remember moment by moment, day by day, to be happy. Daily stuff...writing struggles, rejections, frustrations over how long it all takes...can make it tough to remain cheerful. What some people find helpful is a visual reminder of what they are trying to achieve by being a Happy Writer.

A few years ago, my friends and I wanted to reflect on the past year and set intentions for the year to come (we do this every year in some way, shape or form). We wanted to do this in a fun and creative way, so we decided to make vision boards. A vision board is usually a posterboard of some sort on which you paste a collage of pictures, words, etc., that represent something in particular.

For a writer, a vision board can provide you with what amounts to a tangible pep talk. A photographic representation of what being a Happy Writer means to you, for instance. A collage of pictures or quotes that remind you what you’re working toward.

Vision boards can be any size, be created with any medium. There is no right or wrong way to make one. The only rule is it has to speak to YOU.

Vision boards are super simple to make. There are only a few “ingredients” for a basic vision board, which include:

- Poster board. I recommend not too big, because you don’t want to feel pressured to fill a gigantic board. We found that buying a standard size poster board and splitting it between two of us worked great.
- Old magazines. Since we’re talking about making inspirational vision boards, you may want to choose writing magazines and others that contain motivational pictures and articles. In other words, you may not find much in Guns and Ammo that inspires you to be a Happy Writer.
- Quotes, pictures printed off the Internet, mementos that have meaning to you as a writer.
- Glue sticks or Scotch tape.
- Scissors.
- Optional: Markers, a photo of yourself, paper and pens if you feel inspired to write your own inspiration, etc. Be creative!
HOW TO CREATE A VISION BOARD

Vision boards can be as planned or as spontaneous as you like.

If you choose to plan yours out, you may decide on something you wish to focus on....thoughts or feelings you want to evoke about writing, specific representations of goals or resolutions you have. I printed out a “blank check,” as well as a copy of the New York Times Bestseller list for fiction. I filled out the check with an amount I would love to receive as an advance, and whited out the current #1 bestseller’s name and replaced it with my own (sorry, whoever you were!).

Maybe you just decide to go with the flow and look for pictures that speak to you from the magazines you chose. Before you start browse the magazines, think for a few minutes on what feelings you want to feel when you look at your board...happiness, motivation, inspiration to write, etc. Ask your Muse to speak to you and show you what you most need to work on in your writing life.

Maybe you want to combine planning with spontaneity to create your vision board. Think some of it out and then let the rest just come to you. Again, there is no single way to create a board. Do whatever you like! The point is the feeling that it will give you when you look at it, often, throughout the coming year, month, whatever.

Whether you want to create your board alone or with friends is also up to you. My writing friends and I found there was something really therapeutic about talking our way through creating our boards. We sprawled across any flat surface we could find...the floor, the table, the couch...and tossed magazines and glue sticks back and forth across the room as we bounced ideas off of each other. We shared with each other what we wanted to change in the new year, how we wanted to feel.

We laughed when certain pictures gave us goose bumps because we felt like we were being “spoken to” by someone who was determined to give us exactly what we needed. I was struggling at the time with self-confidence, and one of the headlines I ran across was, “Believe in the Power of Your Dreams!” It seemed almost supernatural to find exactly what I needed at that moment.

Some of us clipped pictures from magazines and immediately glued them to our boards, trusting that it would all “fit” in the end. Others of us waited until we had collected everything we wanted for our boards before deciding on placement, based on size and shape or grouping like items together, like everything that invoked ideas of creativity in one area, while saving another area for anything related to goal achievement.
NO LIMITS

Not everything on your vision board has to be specifically about writing. If it represents a feeling you want in any area of your life that will ultimately contribute to making you a Happy Writer, use it! I included inspirational words about time management and financial goals in order to remind myself that achieving those things would go a long way toward freeing up my time to write happily.

If you want a less permanent, more fluid, vision board, use a corkboard or even a magnetic white board and update it more often with anything you find inspiring, removing items when they no longer speak to you. If something makes you Happy, you want to see it as often as possible!

I recommend hanging your vision board somewhere prominent. Maybe in your office, if you have one. Maybe in your bedroom or on the refrigerator. Don’t be shy about where you post it, but also remember, your vision board is likely to invite questions, so if you don’t want to talk about it, don’t put it where others can see it.

While I’ve talked here about using vision boards in your quest to be a Happy Writer, some writers use them to visualize the book they are working on or like a “story bible” when they have a series of books set in the same place with maps, pictures of the architecture or landscaping. A vision board can be used to remind a writer what feelings and thoughts they want to remember, for instance, about the small town their mysteries are set in. You can even make vision boards that represent your main characters.

The only limit to creating a vision board is what your mind can imagine. And Happy Writers have pretty great imaginations!

Tip: For more reading about vision boards, there’s even a Complete Idiot’s Guide to Vision Boards by Marcia Layton Turner.
HAPPY CHOICES

What do you really want from your writing? A career? A side job that brings in a little bit extra cash once in a while?

Just to be able to write?

I think often we forget to define what it is we want...which makes satisfaction a little harder to achieve.

I’ve noticed something within the very large writing organization I belong to (it doesn’t matter which one, as I suspect it is the same within just about any writing organization in existence). I’ve belonged for more than a decade, and a decade before that I was a member for a few years before taking a break to care for my family. Many writers who are currently members were also members two decades ago when I first joined. Most professed back then to want to publish. Some have succeeded. Some have succeeded spectacularly well. Some have not.

But the shocking observation? Some have Not. Even. Tried.

As in, after decades of forking out the not unsubstantial dues for the national membership, as well as membership in a local group (or groups), they have not sent in a single query. Some have not completed a manuscript, or even if they have completed many manuscripts, they never submit them.

They write. They may even belong to a critique group. They may enter contest after contest, sometimes even placing or winning them. When pressed, they speak half-heartedly about wanting to be published, wanting to have a writing career...but they don’t do anything to make it possible to achieve that.

I want to shake them! Don’t bother to say it if you don’t mean it enough to try.

Maybe that seems cruel of me, because maybe they’re scared. Maybe they don’t feel confident yet. But if they’ve been at it for twenty years and haven’t yet submitted anything because they don’t feel they’re ready...it’s really because they are scared, and that’s no excuse not to go for what they say they want.

I would argue that they just don’t want it that bad. Which is okay. It’s okay not to care about being a published writer. To write for the sheer love of it.
But you know what’s sad? That they aren’t comfortable enough to admit that they aren’t in it for the contract.

They don’t really care about being published. They just love writing. And they are afraid that’s not okay.

**WHEN IT DOESN’T FEEL OKAY**

While the writers’ group I belong to is primarily meant to be a professional organization, there’s no rule about having to be published to belong. And, yet, I know there are many members who feel the pressure to work toward that end and are unhappy or feel like failures as writers because they’re satisfied just crafting stories for their own pleasure or to share with their families and friends.

Other writers look down on them for not putting themselves out there, for not sharing in the trauma of rejection or the myriad of other challenges that go along with submitting for publication.

It’s pretty hard to enjoy something you love doing when you’re getting the stink eye from people who don’t think you’re doing it “right.” Meaning you’re not doing what they’re doing.

In his book *How to Be Happier Day by Day*, Alan Epstein, Ph.D, says: “The quality of my own happiness shot up like a rocket when I realized that I didn’t have to live anyone else’s life, that what I wanted to do was valid and legitimate, even if others found it ‘weird’ or ‘unorthodox’ or ‘radical.’”

Ah, now that’s a freeing thought, isn’t it? To just own your choice. Decide it’s okay to want what you want and damn all those who disagree. To decide you’re going to be Happy no matter whether you write for others or strictly for yourself.

But to be truly happy with that choice, you need to stop telling everyone you want to be published, when you really don’t give a hoot! You can you feel yourself relax at the idea, can’t you?

While this book may deal mostly with writers aiming for publication, those who just write for pleasure will find no haughty sniffing in their direction.

But I’m here to plead with you...whatever your choice is for your writing, OWN IT. Do not let anyone else tell you what you should desire from your writing. If you want to self-publish your memoirs, be okay with it. If your aspire to write articles and publish them only in the obscure
little magazine that’s been your favorite for 20 years, be okay with that.

If you don’t care if you’re ever published, then be okay with *that*.

It’s not a crime to love your art so much that you would do it even if you never got paid (or only get paid a small token). In fact, writers who fit that mold often write more and write better than those of us with ulterior motives.

Those of us aiming for publication may have a lot to learn from those of you who are simply passionate about writing. Because often you are the Happiest Writers.
ARE YOU AN EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY WRITER?
A few months ago we had a large amount of upheaval at my house. It started with a little bit of sadness and escalated into drama, drama and more drama.

I don’t do drama. It’s exhausting and creativity-zapping and de-motivating. My immediate family seems to be able to get through dramatic events without drama...but there are others in our extended family who seem to make drama out of nothing, because their lives are so empty they have nothing better to do.

So I hadn’t done much in two weeks. My desire to read about happiness or to try to empower others to find happiness just disappeared. How could I possibly motivate others when I felt like there was a drama bomb hovering over my head waiting for the next explosion?

Even after the purveyors of the drama had exited the building, leaving me and my family alone for a while to sleep off the emotional hangover, I was on edge and couldn’t have found my optimism if I’d had the energy to even try.

The last thing I felt like doing was smiling. Instead, I laid around, watching angsty dramas on TV and wishing I felt better. You’d think I would have been Happy! Joyful! The curtain had fallen on the dramatic life play we didn’t even want tickets to in the first place.

But emotions aren’t like that. The adrenaline wears off (and high emotions bring with them adrenaline, believe me, since it puts you in a survival mode of sorts, just like physical danger does), and your body suddenly demands recovery time.

THE CURE
As things remained calm for a few days, though, the worst of it over, I began seeking things to renew myself, to bring back my positive attitude.

First I TiVo’d the dramas for later and stuck to a few choice sitcoms. Then, instead of the nonfiction I’d been reading, I escaped into fiction, which I hadn’t actually read for about a month. Prior to the drama, I’d been immersed in the fascinating study of happiness and positive psychology, which had been bringing me great joy and feeding my creativity. But suddenly that wasn’t enough.

I picked up a romantic comedy by a favorite author. This was her first solo book in a few years. I knew she wouldn’t let me down, and she didn’t. I devoured the book in 24 hours, laughing and crying throughout the whole thing.
Then I picked up another romance novel by another old favorite sucking it up like a person parched from being broiled in the desert sun. I felt my smile returning for the first time in weeks.

Slowly my happiness poked its head out of the dark closet it had been hiding in for the last couple weeks in an effort to avoid the drama.

A friend admitted to a similar recent experience. She was going through a time of high-stress and emotions at the same time she was reading a young adult series that took place in a dystopian society that included some pretty gruesome and depressing situations. She felt the books, though very well written and attention-holding, were adding to her feelings of tension and stress. She finally took a step back and switched to lighter fare. Once she did, her mood lifted, and she was able to pull out of her stress more quickly.

So what turned things around (aside from the retreat of the energy vampires determined to undermine my happiness)? I think part of it was just being sensitive to how I was feeling and how the things around me were contributing to that feeling.

In the same way the food we eat affects our body’s health, everything we make part of our lives, from the TV and movies we watch, to the books we read, has an effect on our mood. Sometimes we need to revise what we eat to feel physically healthier, and sometimes we need to revise the sensory input we feed our minds in order to maintain (or restore) our mental health.

In this case, to heal a painful situation, I followed my intuition to the books I knew would warm my heart and remind me that no matter what was going on in my “real world,” there was still a lot of love out there and all I had to do was relax and let myself return naturally to my normal state. That of creative health.

Which makes me very Happy.

Next time you feel emotionally volatile and unable to find your Happy, really look at what you might be feeding these emotions and make some adjustments to your “diet.” Being more sensitive to what you’re consuming can help increase your Happiness Factor, not only in your writing, but in your whole life.
DON’T WORRY, WRITE HAPPY

For writers who want to be published, fear and worry tend to be a major part of our psyche.

We worry we’re choosing to write the wrong book or in the wrong genre. We worry our premise isn’t hot enough, that we’re not thinking far enough out of box...or are thinking too far out of the box. We worry we’ll never have another good idea.

We fear our book will be rejected, that we’ll never get published. Or that we’ll sell this book and no one will like it and reviewers will trash it. Or, if we are already published, we fear we’ll never get published again. We fear we’ll never be able to make this a career.

The enormity of our insecurities could fill an amphitheater.

In a great video by Elizabeth Gilbert, called “Nurturing Creativity,” she talks about the fear she went through as she wrote the follow-up book to her amazing bestseller, Eat, Pray, Love. Though writing was her passion, she was terrified that she would never again achieve the kind of success she had with Eat, Pray, Love.

It became kind of paralyzing to her creativity.

She finally asked herself, “Is it logical that anybody should be expected to be afraid of the work that they feel they were put on this earth to do?”

The answer, of course, is no. We should not write with fear breathing over our shoulder, whispering in our ear all the things that could go wrong. No one can create under that kind of pressure.

REHEARSE THE OUTCOME YOU WANT, NOT THE ONE YOU DON’T WANT

Seth Godin, in Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?, said that being anxious about the future is like rehearsing for failure. If you consider that the book you’re writing right now might not ever be published, you are rehearsing what it would feel like to be in just that scenario.

We have this part of our brain call the pre-frontal cortex that works as an “experience simulator.” It’s the part of the brain that allows us to dream of things that haven’t happened to us—like winning the lottery or falling madly in love—and to actually feel what that experience would be like. Our heartbeats increase, we feel the rush of adrenaline and our faces break into smiles. It’s as if we are really experiencing that event. We’ve all done this.
In the same way we can use our minds to virtually experience good things, we can do the same with bad things. Like worrying the plane we’re on might crash. Like having our manuscript rejected. Like having our soon-to-be-published first novel tank with readers, making our publisher regret ever having purchased our book in the first place.

We’ve all done this.

The thing is, your mind can’t tell the difference between an actual event and an event that you are making up. Which means, if you’re worrying about your manuscript being rejected, you will feel all the same feelings you would have if it were actually happening. You’ll feel down, depressed, hopeless. Just as if you were experiencing the rejection right now, though you are only on page 55 of the first draft.

Instead of rehearsing a negative outcome, what if you rehearsed a positive one?

These are the facts: The book or article you’re working on right now? It might just as easily be accepted as rejected. It might just as easily be published as unpublished. It might just as easily be a hit with readers and critics as disappoint them.

Which outcome would you rather virtually experience right now?

You have equal opportunity to virtually practice what it would feel like to succeed as fail.

When Gilbert let herself get psyched out about never achieving the success she did with Eat, Pray, Love, she learned to tell herself, “Don’t be afraid. Don’t be daunted. Just do your job. Continue to show up for your piece of it, whatever that might be.”

Because that’s really all we writers can do, isn’t it? Butt in chair, hands on keyboard. We can’t worry about what will happen later. All that is important is right now. All that is important is the love and care and creativity that you pour into your writing today.

Don’t rehearse your own failure. If you can’t live solely in the present and just write the book, then at least rehearse what it would feel like to succeed.

Think about what it will feel like when just the right agent reads this book. When just the right editor falls in love with it. When it reaches its Perfect Reader, the one who has been waiting for the book only you could write.

Don’t worry. Write Happy.
**Say No to Negativity**

Being a writer is hard. Being a Happy Writer is even harder.

One of the reasons being a Happy Writer can be so difficult is because it’s impossible to control whether those around us are Happy Writers.

I’m sure you’ve all been in a situation at a gathering of writers where someone mentions something they are unhappy about. Like a virus, someone else catches it and agrees, and from there it spreads. Each person, in turn, offers their own reason for being unhappy until the whole thing is out of control. An epidemic of negativity.

Maybe you started off excited about getting together with these writers. But by the time they’re done spreading their pessimism germs, you’re wishing you’d just stayed home to write. You’d have still been happy if you did. Now you just have a neck full of tension, an achy head, and a crappy attitude to boot.

**The Problem With Negativity**

Unfortunately, negativity spreads like second-hand smoke to a nonsmoker. You can smell it, but don’t want to appear rude by waving it away or asking the person to stop blowing it in your face. So you suffer silently, all the while growing more irritated and cranky.

Don’t get me wrong, I think everyone has moments of negativity. Even I get going on rants that probably have my friends wishing I’d just shut up already. But just as there’s a difference between having an occasional drink and being an alcoholic, there’s a difference between indulging in the occasional vent session and being addicted to negativity.

I had a coworker once – let’s call her Pam -- who was a negativity addict. She was never mean to anyone, but she also never found anything in her life to be happy about. The temperature was always too hot or too cold. The noise volume too quiet or too loud. The sun shone too brightly, or the cloud cover was too thick.

She was famous around the office for her complaining. Even she was aware. If you called her on it, she’d just laugh and say, “Well, you know how I am.” No one asked her opinion about anything, because she’d find something about it she didn’t like. It was completely impossible for her to just be happy.

Once, another coworker confided in me that she had two concert tickets for a country music artist who happened to be Pam’s favorite. Beth (also not her real name) toyed with the idea of
asking Pam to go with her, thinking she might get a kick out of it since Pam never did things like that for herself. But, Beth confessed, she didn’t want the concert to be wasted on Pam, who was sure to find fault with something about it.

In the end, Beth took Pam to the concert anyway. Pam was thrilled! She talked about it for weeks beforehand.

I asked Pam the day after the concert if she’d had fun. For a moment, she brightened. “Oh, yeah! It was really fun to see him in concert.” But then her face fell. “If only it hadn’t been so hot in the room...if only the couple behind us hadn’t talked the whole time...if only the music hadn’t been so loud...if only the seats hadn’t been so hard. I’ll never go to another concert.”

Beth, meanwhile, hadn’t enjoyed herself much at all. She’d had to put up with Pam’s complaints, which began within five minutes of taking their seats and continued the whole evening. Pam’s addiction to negativity spoiled her own fun and, consequently, Beth’s, who ended up wishing she’d taken someone else who would have appreciated the evening more.

While it’s hard to get away from, you have the right not to breathe in someone else’s second-hand negativity. It’s actually a matter of life or death – or at least your mental health.

**Writing and Negative Nellies**

Negativity, unfortunately, is prevalent in the writing world. Writers gripe about how hard writing is, how we can’t catch a break, how editors aren’t buying what we want to write, how the industry is deteriorating, how self-publishing is too much work, etc.

Hopping on that negativity train, especially in a big group, is too easy. You could be the Happiest Writer in the room, and your happiness is going to take a big hit with all that negative energy bombarding it.

Staying off the train takes practice. Again, it’s harder to resist in a big group, but it’s also easier to escape from in a group.

Sometimes, just tuning them out for a few minutes works. Take notes about your work in progress, brainstorm on paper, or just daydream until they get it out of their systems. If someone asks why you’re not paying attention, blame the Muse for showing up. Can’t miss an opportunity like that!

Sometimes, with a bit of skill, you can redirect the conversation by bringing up the more positive aspects of whatever your group is discussing. For instance, if it’s deteriorated into a
complaint session about how editors are only looking for the next Twilight clone, you could point out some of the great new books purchased for publication lately or try to steer the conversation toward what these writers would write if they could write “the next big thing.”

This tactical change won’t always work. Some people are just wedded to their bad attitudes. If you can’t redirect the conversation or tune them out, walk away. This is where a group situation makes it easier. Excuse yourself to go to the bathroom. Feign sudden illness. Suddenly “remember” something you have to do. There is no need to stick it out if you’re miserable or being dragged down. The most important thing is that you not let their negativity and whining breach your barricades.

ONE-ON-ONE NEGATIVITY
But sometimes, it’s not a group, but just one close writing friend who is a problem. Her chronic cynicism darkens your mood every time you’re with her. She’s unhappy, and she subconsciously wants you to be as unhappy as she is, so she won’t be lonely on the dark side. But joining her in the negativity pool never helps. Not her or you.

This situation is harder in that you usually can’t slip away unnoticed when there’s just two of you. But you can try a few things:

- Refuse to join them in the negativity. The lack of participation tends to short circuit their efforts.
- Offer up some positives. Give them a genuine compliment, point out times when things have gone their way.
- Help them reframe the situation, to think outside the negativity box they’ve got themselves in.

Unfortunately, pointing out someone’s negativity usually doesn’t help. Either they don’t see it, or they do, but they don’t understand that they can choose differently if they really want to (feel free to direct them to this book!). Or, worse, they take personal offense to you trying to change them and they just try harder to prove to you they’re right.

Sadly, if they are too far gone, you may have to dissolve the friendship. You don’t owe anyone your soul.

While it may hurt to walk away from negative writing friends, take heart that there are other Happy Writers out there who think like you do. Just like some choose to be negative, you can choose to be positive. Give yourself the gift of positive writing friends. You deserve it.
PARALYZED BY HAPPINESS

I was thinking one day about the possible downfalls of being Happy in relation to writing.

Maybe you’re really happy right where you are. Even if you’re unpublished, you’re happy just writing. You want to be published but you don’t need to be published to be happy.

I’m all for this. I think we should be happy right where we are.

But then it occurred to me to wonder how many of us are so happy right where we are, that we don’t want to do anything to jeopardize that.

Like finish that manuscript.

Like query that national magazine.

Like write a book that’s a little different.

Because we’re Happy, and we’re afraid, if we take that chance -- actually finish that manuscript, send out that query, write that “out there” book that sets our soul on fire -- if we take that chance and we get rejected, we won’t be happy anymore.

So we don’t take the chance. We protect our happiness at all costs. We stick with the status quo, even if that means our dream always remains “out there.” At least it’s safe from harm or rejection.

We reject the possibility of rejection by not taking any chances.

As long as this is the case, you will never accomplish that dream. Are you okay with that?

REJECTING THE NEGATIVE

I read a very interesting book by Tal Ben-Shahar, Ph.D., called The Pursuit of Perfect: How to Stop Chasing Perfection and Start Living a Richer, Happier Life. I think I may have some perfectionist tendencies in certain areas of my life, so I thought this could be helpful. What I really discovered was a gold mine of insight into the psyches of many writers. Including, occasionally, myself.

The insight was that many of us are “reasonably happy” or “acceptably happy” where we are in
our writing lives. We toy with our stories. We have friends in the business who bring us fun and laughter and commiserate with us. We get to read and call it research. If anyone asked us we’d say, “Yes! I love writing! I’m happy!”

We’re happy writing and we love the idea of someday being a published writer. We think positively about the future. We fantasize about how wonderful it will be when all of our dreams come true.

But we stop just short of doing what needs to be done to get published. We hold back on finishing a manuscript and instead start a new one. We put the manuscripts we do finish away in a drawer and never send out queries for them. We write the same books over and over again, even though our heart really wants to try something different.

We avoid rejection at all costs. Because our dream of publication, of getting to the next level, of being a real writer, doesn’t include the possibility of rejection.

How’s that dream of yours working out?

Dr. Ben-Shahar says, “While a positive attitude and resilience clearly contribute to well-being, rejecting painful emotions because there is no room for them in our idealized vision of a happy life is unhealthy in the long run. Taking emotional shortcuts -- detouring to avoid certain feelings -- can, paradoxically, diminish happiness.”

Got that? If you reject the possibility of rejection, you will end up UNhappy.

You will watch your writing friends pass you by. You’ll end up resenting their successes or become depressed because you realize you’ve wasted time being scared and now it feels too late.

EMBRACING THE NEGATIVE

The thing with being a Happy Writer is that it’s not just an endless stream of Happy Happy! Joyful Joyful! It’s made of ups and downs. It’s made of balance.

To feel the happiness, we have to feel the sadness. To experience the success, we need to be okay with failing. Expecting yourself to be happy 100% of the time is just asking for unhappiness.

Because by insisting that you never feel anything but happy, you close yourself off from any possibility of being happier. You will be forever “acceptably happy” or “reasonably happy.”
Or not. Because at some point, when you realize you’ve sabotaged your own chance for achieving your dream because you refused to accept the risk of feeling unhappy, even for a brief moment, whatever happiness you have had may disappear, too.

Having a negative emotion doesn’t mean you’ll never be happy again. In fact, feeling negative emotions makes the next wave of happiness even sweeter.

So take that chance. Finish that manuscript...the feeling of accomplishment will make you happier than you could imagine! Send out that query or write that new and exciting book that’s caught your imagination.

Stop avoiding the possibility of rejection and accept the opportunity of being even happier than you are now.

If you get that rejection anyway, go ahead and feel the sadness. Feel the pain. Get angry. And then congratulate yourself on your courage. That alone should make you very, very Happy.
THE HAPPINESS OF UNCERTAINTY

Writing is an uncertain endeavor at best. There’s no guarantee about anything from beginning to end, from first draft to publishing, from promotion to the reception of our efforts by readers and critics.

But there are a couple of certainties:

1. Uncertainty is what gives us the freedom to be creative. In the shiny new void of the unknown, we’re free to try out new ideas, let characters and stories grow and go where they will.
2. The ability to accept uncertainty and work with it is a sure indicator of whether you’ll be able to ultimately succeed.

THE EFFECTS OF UNCERTAINTY

As writers, uncertainty is what we reach for when we create, knowingly or unknowingly. As I mentioned before, every new idea or inspiration is fresh and blooming with possibilities.

Each new story we write, play we compose, or poem we pen, is reaching into uncertainty. We’re looking for an emotion, a theme, or something we haven’t even identified yet. If we were certain perfection had already been created, we’d have no reason to create further.

However, uncertainty can also make us feel out of control. When the outcome is unknown, venturing forth can produce strong fear. Scientists have discovered that uncertainty actually produces a physical response in the brain.

Added to just general uncertainty, creators of any sort, artists, musicians, and yes, writers, face the uncertainty of judgment.

In the book, Uncertainty: Turning Fear and Doubt into Fuel for Brilliance, Jonathan Fields says that, as creators, our worries about being judged can lead us to cut short our creative quests or, worse, never begin. Fear of uncertainty can also make us less innovative, less willing to share our ideas for fear of judgment.

I’m guessing you can see where this would make us unhappy writers. Uncertainty can cripple our creativity. It can leave us unwilling to venture from our comfort zones because we don’t know what’s on the other side.
WHY IS UNCERTAINTY SO SCARY?

While it may be freeing to write something new, whether it’s simply a new book or screenplay, or something even further out of our comfort zone, like writing in a new genre, or querying our dream magazine editor, any time you can’t know or predict if there will be a positive outcome, it’s like stepping into a void.

But when you introduce judgment, the scariness factor goes up exponentially.

Since criticism by readers and reviewers is part of the publishing business, whether we’re talking fiction, nonfiction, or magazine articles, it’s clear that writers have to deal with that extreme fear of uncertainty on a regular basis.

For writers, uncertainty seems to fit into several categories:

Self-uncertainty: Can I write a book/article/short story? Will I do my screenplay/book justice with this treatment/query? Do I have the guts to try something completely new? Will I be able to persevere when times are hard? Do I have what it takes to promote my writing?

Judgment uncertainty: Will I pass the scrutiny of my peers (agents/editors)? Will readers judge my efforts worthy and pay me? Will reviewers criticize me harshly?

Success uncertainty: Will I achieve monetary success? Will I make enough money to quit my job or even just convince my family that I’m not wasting my time? Will the money I invest in self-publishing or promoting my book do any good?

Any (or all) of the above can be paralyzing, but they need to be worked through in order to succeed as a writer.

THE POSITIVE SIDE OF UNCERTAINTY

The solution to all of this would be to avoid uncertainty, right? Don’t submit unless you’re sure to sell. If you’ve successfully managed to publish, stick with what works and write the same book over and over again, within the genre (for the publisher) that has already accepted you. Avoid anything controversial, that might invite readers to criticize or, worse, not buy your books at all. Right?

But eliminating uncertainty also eliminates feedback. Feedback helps us learn what our strengths are, as well as what we need to work on. This feedback comes from various sources throughout our careers. Critique partners, beta readers, agents and editors, and finally readers and reviewers.
Our ability to work through our fears about judgment and start seeing it as feedback can make us better, bringing us closer to success than someone who hides from this uncertainty.

Note: This doesn’t mean that every single negative remark by agents and editors (or readers and reviewers) should be taken as gospel. If you do that, you’ll make yourself crazy trying to please everyone. But if four different agents mention that your main character is unlikeable and they just couldn’t continue reading, maybe you need to look at her with new eyes. (See my book The Rejection First Aid Kit for more ideas on how to analyze this kind of feedback to improve your writing.)

INVITING UNCERTAINTY TO THE PARTY
The thing with avoiding uncertainty is that our very avoidance of it can make its effects worse. We isolate ourselves, avoiding risks for fear of reaching out and smashing our knuckles against that protective brick wall we’ve built around our comfort zones.

On the other hand, inviting uncertainty into your life, into your writing, can help you build up an immunity to it. Once you’ve faced a rejection or two, once you’ve had a reader or two (or twelve) tell you you suck, your skin takes on a certain thickness. You begin to feel less impact from the negative, more gratefulness for the positive...and this, in turn, helps that uncertainty feel less scary.

“The more you act in the face of [uncertainty] and survive, the less you feel its stranglehold,” Fields says.

The more often you attempt to climb that wall you’ve erected around your comfort zone, the more skilled you’ll become at finding those footholds, the niches where your fingers fit.

Soon, the thought of what might exist on the other side of that brick wall -- uncertain though it may be -- will be so enticing, you won’t be able to stop yourself from making the climb.

HOW TO FACE UNCERTAINTY
Now that we’ve learned that there is benefit (and the ability to be a Happy Writer!) to the uncertainty, let’s look at a few different ways to face it and embrace it.

Build up to bigger uncertainties. Start with small risks...show your work to a critique partner, write a query letter just to see what happens, begin a story in a completely new genre just for yourself, then enter it in a contest. As you take smaller risks, you’ll get used to uncertainty and feel more comfortable with risks.
**Remember that uncertainties aren’t all negative.** How many of us have reluctantly attended a gathering where we thought we wouldn’t know anyone, only to find a new friend? There’s just as good a chance for great things to happen when we invite uncertainty into our lives as negative things.

**Think of uncertainty as adventure.** America would never have been discovered had someone not been willing to embark on a journey that was uncertain at best. Rather than thinking of yourself entering a scary place full of monsters, think of yourself setting sail on a ship to a possible land full of light and joy.

**Be of growth mindset.** According to Carol Dweck, author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, we’re all either of fixed or grown mindset. Those who have a growth mindset know that they succeed, not on talent alone, but on hard work, leaning into uncertainty, and learning from feedback (positive or negative).

**Know that we’re all in this together.** There’s not a writer out there who hasn’t felt exactly what you’re feeling. If you look at those who have reached the goals you want to reach, you’ll see that they have conquered their fear of uncertainty. Or are at least willing to face the fear. This should give you courage that you, too, can step out of your comfort zone into the uncertainty.

A Happy Writer is one who looks at uncertainty as a *gift of possibility*. Uncertainty is simply the unknown...and there is often wonder in the unknown.
I love it when people make me think. I’m human, and I can only really think from my own point of view, so I sometimes miss what makes other writers unhappy because I’m so busy analyzing myself.

When I wrote the chapter, Say No to Negativity, I talked about not letting ourselves get caught up in the negativity of other writers, how to redirect conversations when able, and knowing when to walk away.

I didn’t really stop to think, though, about how the perspective of an unpublished writer might be different from mine as a published writer.

A comment on the blog (at the time Say No to Negativity was originally written), opened my eyes. The commenter said:

“I had the opportunity to join a group of published writers at a luncheon – and though I was flattered they felt comfortable to speak freely around me (giving me insight into the world after being published), I wanted to tell them to stop complaining and be thankful they were published and that an editor accepted or denied their story based on an idea, not three chapters and a synopsis (and actually a completed story since it has to be done before submitting).”

While I understood her feelings, as a newly published author, voicing some frustration with some things going on with my publisher to a group I belonged to, I had been told by an unpublished writer that “at least I was published” and that I shouldn’t be complaining about anything.

This made it really difficult to feel supported in that group. I was unable to be honest about my feelings from that point forward and couldn’t talk about what was hard about writing/publishing, because I didn’t want to seem ungrateful.

To be honest, this is often why published authors drift away from their unpublished friends. If they find they’ve gone from being able to be open and honest in a group of friends to suddenly finding they can’t be honest about the hard stuff that overwhelms them, they often seek out people they can be honest with.

I haven’t found this to be an issue for a while. The unpublished (as well as published) friends I have are amazingly supportive and I feel I can be myself and honestly explore what it feels like to be a published writer in what can be a very difficult business.
However, the commenter on the negativity post made me realize it was kind of insensitive of me not to think about how these things impact unpublished writers differently than published writers.

Unpubs usually want more than anything to be published, and listening to writers who have achieved that dream being pissy about it is pretty hard to take.

I decided it made sense to go a little deeper and talk about kinds of negativity, as well as how it differs between published and unpublished writers.

THE POV OF UNPUBS
So, you’re an unpublished writer with a dream of being published. It’s hard to stay motivated through rejection as it is, and now you find yourself in a room full of published writers who can’t stop bitching and moaning about how hard it is.

There are a couple ways you might feel about this:

- It deflates you. The cynicism and gloom have you feeling bad and you’re not even sure you really want to do this anymore. If it just gets harder, what’s the use?
- You file away everything they talk about -- bad print runs, lack of support from their publisher’s publicity department, crappy cover art, declining advances, the trials and tribulations of self-publishing. You add these to your growing stores of knowledge about the industry so you’re not surprised or shocked by it when you make your own sale.

I’ve experienced both of those options. I’ve been the starry-eyed newbie, who thought everything would be wonderful when I got published and that writers who had achieved that status had no right to whine.

But, as time went on, I noticed that these issues being batted around and dissected by the pubs weren’t going away. Even over 10 years, they never changed. Which told me that they were all part of the business.

Which meant, if I wanted to be part of the business, I had to accept the bad along with the good.

I also, over time, saw examples of writers who, creatively, were amazing, wrote fabulous books, and finally sold...only to have the details of the publishing business so cripple them, they never published another thing.
They were unprepared. Even with my change of attitude, I was unprepared. Now, I’ve become a staunch advocate of learning everything you can, including the bad stuff, to at least give yourself a shot at not being completely overwhelmed.

**THE POV OF PUBS**

Coming at it from the other side of the fence are those already in the business and I emphasize the word *business*. Published authors see an entirely different side of things.

*Writing* is creative, organic, and as Zen as you want it to be. But *publishing* is business. A lot of it is frustrating, doesn’t make sense, or is changing so rapidly it feels like you’ll never be up to speed.

There are a lot of different reasons published authors vent about what makes them unhappy. The primary reason is that they would explode if they didn’t. Gatherings of writers -- who mainly work in solitude -- are like the office watercooler, where co-workers gather to gossip, talk about the things they can’t say in front of the boss without getting reprimanded, or just share frustrations.

Sometimes they exchange information productively, to brainstorm solutions. Other times, they’re just letting off steam. This can be frightening for an unpublished author. Or it can be empowering.

My philosophy is: Knowledge is Happiness. Wanting to be published but ignoring the bad stuff because you don’t want to take away from the joy of the writing, is setting yourself up for disaster.

Ask any published writer about all the things they wish they had known before they sold. Then learn those things...you’ll be so happy you did!

**FINDING BALANCE**

The thing is, negativity isn’t a product of one side of the fence side or the other. Unpubs may be too whiny, judgmental or gloomy (and so might Pubs). Published authors might be elitist, condescending or spend more time bashing the industry than adapting to it or finding ways to change it (and so might unpublished writers).

On the other hand, amongst both published and unpublished writers you will also find those who are the most supportive, helpful, optimistic, adventurous, fun people to be around.

Which category do you fall into?
Whether published or unpublished, your attitude is your choice. If your negative balance outweighs your positive, don’t be surprised if people don’t want to spend time with you. And if you’re more of a positive person, don’t force yourself to hang around those who are negative just because you think you should. Life’s too short and writing is too hard to allow yourself to be miserable.

It’s good to remember, though, that not all negative discussion is about being negative. There’s a balance of needs. Unpublished writers need to stay encouraged and motivated to keep trying through their frustrations. Published writers need to feel free to discuss things that get them down, to exchange ideas about how to cope and/or change situations they find themselves in.

Conversely, unpubs need to learn some of the negatives of the business and pubs need to remember the joy of writing. It’s all about balance on both sides.

The energy put out by different groups can be different, too, even when the topic is the same. If the group is overwhelmingly negative, it won’t matter what they’re discussing…it’s going to suck. If they are mostly positive, a discussion of industry difficulties or writing hardships can be informative and even empowering.

Plus, whatever you bring into the room energy-wise contributes to how you feel about what’s being said. If you come in feeling depressed and rejected as a writing, anything negative will add to your hopelessness. If you are confident about this chosen career and desiring to learn all you can, a tough discussion won’t feel so negative.

The thing is, what makes one person depressed and feel like giving up, may just be an interesting debate to another person. What may seem overly negative in one conversation can seem like a great education in another conversation.

Hopefully, no matter which side of the publishing fence you’re on, you understand a bit more now about the point of view of the other side. All any of us can do is decide in the moment where the tipping point of negativity is for us, whether we’re published or unpublished, and try to understand where the other side is coming from.
Kicking the Complaint Habit

Complaining is too dang easy. Most of us complain about something every day. Some of us more regularly -- or more loudly -- than others. Writers are no exception.

But we have a lot to complain about, don’t we? Writing is HARD! Finding the time, thinking up the ideas, putting together complex stories that someone else might care about reading, editing what we write so it’s coherent and interesting. It’s enough to make a saint complain.

This doesn’t even count all the things about our regular lives that we complain about on a daily basis.

The Negative Aspects of Complaining
The problem with complaining is that it becomes a habit, one which drags us down, roots us in negativity, and often we don’t even notice that we’re doing it because it becomes so ingrained that it’s just “part of us.”

Complaining is also counterproductive. If we’re actively complaining about a situation, it means we’re not doing anything to try to change it or look at it in a different, more positive way. We’re not looking for ways to reframe it.

We complain because it’s easier than taking responsibility for our own actions. Our complaint about how our family isn’t helping out enough around the house is often a cover-up for our own guilt about not utilizing the time we do have more wisely. Placing the blame on others feels better than taking the blame ourselves.

We also often get attention or sympathy from our complaints. It makes us feel connected or part of a group united by similar complaints. As I’ve thought about striking complaining from my life, I’ve suffered moments of panic: what would my friends and I talk about? (However, it’s kind of scary to think that complaining is a big enough part of our interaction that taking it away would be cause for alarm!)

It’s a lot easier to complain. Complain that someone else’s success seemed “too easy” or work hard at securing success for yourself? It’s a no-brainer which is the easier route.

Nixing Complaining
The thing is, complaining is just grown-up whining, something we don’t tolerate (or at least can’t stand) in our kids. They complain about having to brush their teeth, do their homework,
eat their vegetables. We complain about how we have to work too hard at writing if we want to get published, how it’s not fair that we have to write synopses, how we never have time to write. It’s all the same thing. Whether young or old, complaining is habit-forming.

On the other hand, it’s actually a good thing that complaining is a habit. Habits can be changed.

It takes practice though, at least 21 days, so say the experts, to change a habit.

The idea of going without complaining for 21 days seems as impossible as going without food for that long, doesn’t it?

So, what if, instead of trying to break the habit all at once, you went on a complaint fast? Can you go a week -- or a day -- without complaining out loud (or on Twitter, Facebook or by e-mail) about anything?

If it’s too hard to stop complaining about everything in your life (which would really be ideal), try a Writing Complaint Fast. Don’t complain about your writing, the industry, your agent, your editor, your print run, need for promotion, etc., for the predetermined length of the complaint fast.

If you don’t make it, you have to start over again the next day. (Need help? There’s an app for that...try The Habit Factor (Android or iPhone) or Habit Streak (Android) or Way of Life (iPhone).)

If you want to really push yourself, try saying only positive things (and meaning them!) in that span of time. Rather than complain about the fact that you only had half an hour to write today, mention how grateful you were to get a page of writing done during that break between your kids’ soccer and ballet lessons. That’s a page more than a lot of people wrote today!

If you find yourself resisting the idea of conquering the complaining habit, ask yourself why. What are you getting out of it that you’re reluctant to give up? Are you afraid you won’t have anything important to say if it’s not presented as a complaint? Are you afraid you’ll lose your friends? Are you afraid you’ll have to replace the complaining with actual action?

Be honest with yourself and you might end up seeing how ridiculous it is to hold fast to your complaining ways.

Do I think it’s reasonable to expect that none of us will ever complain again? Probably not. But we can do lot to turn the tide in our lives from negative to positive if we just make complaining
the exception rather than the rule.

Up for a Complaint Fast this week?
YOUR BEST WRITING LIFE NOW

A few years ago, I was at a writers’ conference, surrounded by very successful writers, admiring their professionalism, drive and discipline. I wanted to be like them...and I imagined I would be. Someday. When I was as successful as they were.

It just seemed like a natural progression, you know. Once I had achieved what I was working toward, I would automatically be a different type of writer than I was as a relative newbie with only one book under my belt.

Wouldn’t I?

But as I looked around the room, imagining the day when I would have a super-productive writing schedule like Author A or be taken more seriously as a writer by my family and friends like Author B, I wondered at what point I would make that change.

When would I stop procrastinating and start getting serious? When would I formulate that career plan and stick to it? When would I insist that others respect my writing time and take my writing seriously? When would I have the Best Writing Life Evah?

Then it occurred to me -- rather alarmingly -- that none of that was likely to happen at all. Instead, odds were I would likely remain exactly the kind of writer I was at that moment.

Because I wasn’t doing anything to change the kind of writer I was.

LET’S IMAGINE
So play along with me for a minute and imagine you have already achieved your dream of being published. Or, if you’re already published, imagine your career has reached the level of success you are hoping to achieve.

Get a good picture of yourself in that place. Imagine your writing schedule, how you approach writing, how you treat yourself. Then, let’s ask some questions.

What will you do differently when you are published (or when you achieve success)? Not what will be different...but what will you do differently? Will you write more? Be more disciplined? Be more protective of your writing time? Will you take yourself more seriously as a writer?

Seriously, write this stuff down.
If you have trouble picturing *yourself* published or extremely successful, try imagining an author you really admire and asking yourself what a day in their life is like. What do they accomplish in a day? How do they present themselves as a writer when they are in public? Etc.

You probably have some pretty clear ideas of you-as-a-published-author. Obviously it will all be easier. The writing, the promo, the motivation to be the best writer possible. All of that will be easier once you’re published (or successful). You’ll automatically be inspired. Driven. Happy.

**THE REALITY**

Only it won’t be easier. So much about being published is different than being unpublished. So much about having a full-time writing career is different than just having a book or two on the shelves. So much of both of those achievements is going to be *harder* than where you are right now. And if you aren’t properly prepared...

The problem is that right now is when we are developing our writing habits. If we procrastinate now, we’re going to procrastinate then. If we don’t take ourselves seriously now, we will have a much harder time taking ourselves seriously then. These good habits will not miraculously appear when we sign on the dotted line for a three-book contract.

What we do today will likely be what we continue to do in the future, no matter how circumstances change.

See where I’m going with this?

**DEVELOPING SUCCESS HABITS NOW**

Aristotle said: “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

So to achieve the excellence we desire, whether it be our first book contract, a steady writing career, or a million-dollar contract, we need to begin that excellence habit now. We need to start right now acting as if we have already achieved what we’re working toward.

Go back to how you imagined yourself published or with the writing career you really want and your list of what will be different. Take notes:

- What habits will you have?
- How will you structure your writing time?
- How will you make time to fulfill your contracts and balance writing with your real life?
- How will you treat your career seriously?
Now -- what can you begin to do to form those habits NOW?

Believe me, the time to figure this out is not when you have a deadline looming in six months for a 100,000-word book you haven’t started yet. You need to figure this out now.

If you need more help figuring this out, study successful writers by attending workshops or reading interviews online and in writing magazines and books. It may seem overwhelming at first, so choose just one or two habits that you would most like to emulate and figure out how you can start practicing now to be the success that you want to be in the future.

The biggest thing to remember is: Don’t wait for someday. Don’t wait until then. You can have your Best Writing Life right now.

Because doing now what you believe you would do then, will help you get there faster.
OBSTACLE OR EXCUSE?

It’s amazing how many “reasons” a writer can find for not writing. I’m including myself in this, too, lest you think I’m claiming innocence.

I can excuse-find with the best of them, although I have to admit with working on The Happy Writer, it’s happening less often. Maybe because, through being forced to think more consciously about what I want as a writer, what makes me Happy, I’m less and less apt to choose Free Cell or television as a way to fill my time. I more often choose writing, though still struggle sometimes with what I choose to write.

So how do we the tell the difference between the true reasons we “can’t” write and just an excuse that we choose over writing?

GOT EXCUSES?

Probably the biggest reason writers don’t reach their goals is because they make excuses about why they can’t write. They “don’t have time,” “don’t have a quiet place to write,” “can’t think of anything good to write about.”

Sometimes the difference is in the way we think about the reason we don’t get any writing done. Is the reason an obstacle or an excuse?

In Supercoach: 10 Secrets to Transform Anyone’s Life, Michael Neill says (with my emphasis): “If we treat whatever stands in our way as an obstacle, we can bring the full creative resources of our mind to bear on the situation and find ways to get over it, or through it. If we choose to use it as an excuse, we allow ourselves to be tripped up or otherwise stopped by it.”

If, for instance, you say, “I don’t have time to write,” and you look at it as an obstacle, according to Neill, you can “find ways to get over it or through it.” You can examine your available time and how you utilize it, calculate time you might be wasting or choosing another activity besides writing, and then make writing work with your schedule. (Cathy Yardley discusses this more in depth in Write Every Day: How to Write Faster, and Write More.)

If, on the other hand, you never really take a hard objective look at “I don’t have time” and don’t devise a solution to it, it becomes an excuse. Because if you’re not willing to really look at it, you don’t really want to change it.

MAKE YOUR CHOICE
The best thing about this distinction between obstacle and excuse is that it’s your choice how to think of it. And either way it can be fixed.

Neill says: “If it’s an obstacle, brainstorm your way around it. If it’s an excuse, decide to make it an obstacle and fix it. If it remains an excuse – maybe you don’t want the goal bad enough.”

That’s right! Even if it looks like a legitimate reason, change your thinking about it. Make it an obstacle instead of an excuse and get to work on its solution.

You can turn that Free Cell free-for-all into an obstacle instead of an excuse, and then figure out how to remove it. I removed all games from my laptop so I would stop playing them when I should be writing. Drastic? It felt like it! But the result was that I changed the excuse into an obstacle and then got rid of it.

If I had chosen to leave Free Cell on my computer and kept playing it, I was making a choice, either consciously or unconsciously. The choice that games were more important than my writing.

**HOW TO TACKLE AN OBSTACLE**
Nearly any obstacle can be removed or worked around. Even the reasons that seem true aren’t necessarily true at all. I’ve been notorious for saying “I’m too busy” to write...only to catch myself mindless surfing the web for hours. Or watching endless movie trailers.

A seemingly legitimate reason for not writing between the hours of 9 to 5 is that you have a day job. But is it really a legitimate reason? Maybe it’s just an obstacle you can work around. If you wrote, for instance, for 45 minutes of your lunch break five days a week, that’s almost four hours writing per week. That’s more writing time than a lot of people get!

Some day jobs have more flexibility. For instance, I work a full-time day job (at home, but I still have to put the hours in, and I’m paid by my production, so I can’t screw around and still make enough to pay my bills). I wanted more writing time, but “couldn’t do it” because I had to work.

After reading Supercoach and Neill’s idea about obstacle versus excuse, I decided to turn it into an obstacle and see if I could work around it. I asked if I could split the hours of my day up with a two- to three-hour break mid-day. They said okay, and I now have several more hours of writing time each week. I’m home alone to concentrate on writing during my writing time, and just work later in the day because my day job isn’t disturbed by others being in the house with me.
A friend of mine has discovered the joy of the free childcare at her local grocery store. She can drop her son off for an hour of free fun and socialization while she sits in the attached coffee shop for some writing time. Brilliant work-around of what could otherwise be just an excuse for her not to get any writing done.

Another excuse might be that you don’t have a quiet place to write. How to turn that into an obstacle? Give it some real thought. Decide that it’s just an obstacle and that you’re smart enough to figure it out.

If you can’t leave the house to write, invest in some noise-canceling headphones, but don’t turn any music on! They will muffle most of the sound, helping you concentrate. Or use nature sounds or ocean sounds to drown out Sponge Bob. Try the library. Most of them have study rooms that are sound-proof and there’s no reason you can’t write there.

If it’s not about the noise but about being too accessible to the family, who can’t seem to find the milk if you aren’t there to show them where it is, try the local coffee shop. Don’t want to spend $5 for a cup of coffee for the privilege of writing there? Try the library, the local park, or the in-store café at the local Shop ‘N Save.

The point is, an obstacle can be worked around. An excuse is just an excuse. Happy Writers don’t make excuses...they create solutions to their obstacles.
**WRITER OR PROCRASTINATOR?**

The biggest reason I hear for writers not writing is that they procrastinate. I’ve used the excuse myself. “I’m procrastinating.”

I’m quite skilled at procrastination, having once procrastinated so well that I didn’t write for months. I finally came to the sad conclusion that I wasn’t really procrastinating. *I simply wasn’t writing.*

By definition procrastination is “putting off or delaying or deferring an action to a later time.” If “a later time” never comes, or doesn’t come within a reasonable amount of time (hours or days, maybe?) you can’t really call it procrastination. You’re simply not writing. And you need to knock it off.

I need to knock it off.

**TYPES OF PROCRASTINATORS**

In the Psychology Today article, *Why We Procrastinate,* by Hara Estroff Marano, Joseph Ferrari, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at De Paul University in Chicago, says there are three types of procrastinators:

- Arousal types, or thrill-seekers, who wait to the last minute for the euphoric rush.
- Avoiders, who may be avoiding fear of failure or even fear of success, but in either case are very concerned with what others think of them; they would rather have others think they lack effort than ability.
- Decisional procrastinators, who cannot make a decision. Not making a decision absolves procrastinators of responsibility for the outcome of events.

I think “writing procrastinators” can fit any of those categories quite easily:

- The “arousal” procrastinators live for the deadline, then practically kill themselves writing within the time limit they’ve left themselves. I have a writing friend like this. She vacillates from feeling powerful that she can get it done at the last second, thoroughly immersing herself in the writing (which she *does* enjoy) and kicking herself because the stress nearly kills her (not to mention her family).
- Writers who are “avoider” procrastinators have their pick of fear of writing failure or fear of writing success. By the above definition, though, the part that makes the most sense to me, is that they’re concerned about how other writers see them and prefer to be thought of as lazy rather than possibly to be discovered not to be good writers.
• Lastly, the “decisional” procrastinator writers can’t decide what to write, which project, which genre, which point of view......and that indecision means to them that they don’t have to write until they make the decision and that it’s not their fault they aren’t writing.

Any of that look sadly familiar? Yeah. I have personally fit into both of the last two options at various points in my writing career.

Of all of those, only the arousal procrastinator ever gets around to writing. The other two can put it off ad infinitum because they can remain scared or undecided for eternity.

The thing is, no matter which of those procrastinators you are, they all have one thing in common...relying on Future You to do the writing. In an earlier chapter, Your Best Writing Life I talked about creating NOW the habits we want to have later. This is one of these areas where it applies.

Because, really, what are the chances that Future You will be any better at getting down to work than Present You? Relying on Future You to get that manuscript written is like crossing your fingers you’ll win the lottery to pay your bills next week.

**OH, YOUR PROCRASTINATING WAYS**

There are all kinds of ways to “procrastinate.” I’ve been known to clean house as a means of procrastination...and I HATE cleaning house. Some procrastinators will actually spend time looking for things with which to procrastinate...not like that’s too difficult a feat, what with e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc., just a mere mouse click away.

It makes little difference what you do to avoid writing. The key is that you are avoiding writing.

It may be eye-opening to realize, though, that once you hit episode four of a Firefly marathon, it becomes no longer “procrastinating from writing.” At that point, it is just plain watching TV. Saying “I’m procrastinating” becomes a big, bold lie. Because you really have no intention of writing. You have simply chosen to watch television instead of write.

Ouch.

I’m not saying you have to write 24/7. Lord knows I couldn’t do that. But when I plop on the couch for an evening of sitcoms, I have no right to say what I’m doing is procrastinating.

I’m simply choosing to do something other than writing.
I’m down with making different choices. Again, no one says you have to write all the time. A bit of creative refreshment (especially if it involves Nathan Fillion in the form of *Firefly* DVDs or Monday night’s *Castle* episodes) is good for the soul.

The problem is with not recognizing that you are making a choice. You have the power to choose to do or not do anything in your life. Not owning your choices is giving away your power. Write or don’t write. But own that choice.

What difference would it make if we were more honest about what we were choosing to do? What if, the next time you find yourself explaining to someone (or yourself) that “I’m procrastinating,” you stop yourself instead and be completely honest?

“‘I’m choosing to surf the Internet instead of write.”

“‘I’m choosing to veg in front of the television instead of write.”

“‘I’m choosing to play Candy Crush for two hours instead of write.”

Once you apply a bit of honesty to the situation, you’ll either be perfectly okay with it (which is okay, if you’re really okay with it, but not okay if you’re going to beat yourself up about it later) and keep doing what you’re doing, OR you’ll realize that you’re not happy with the choices you’re making and you’ll choose differently.

But the only way to do that is to be honest with yourself.

**HOW DO YOU CHANGE?**

I could mention all kinds of ways to manage time, decide what’s important and then set up elaborate schedules to accomplish it all. But when it comes to procrastination, all the schedules in the world aren’t not going to change anything unless we choose differently.

There is one way to change...stop calling yourself a procrastinator. By identifying yourself by that description, you’re claiming ownership, and psychologically we can never let go of something we are claiming ownership of. (Consequently, I also don’t believe in calling diseases mine, like “my diabetes” or “my cancer.” Call me paranoid, but I don’t believe you can cure something or get rid of it if you continue to claim it as belonging to you.)

From this day forth, make a choice: Are you a procrastinator or a writer?

Once you make up your mind, you’ll know exactly what you need to do.
SETTING HAPPY INTENTIONS

I know some of my posts lately have been kind of uncomfortable...to write, as well as read. I’ve talked a lot about not waiting to create our best writing life, where we make excuses or take on identities we shouldn’t take on.

Today, I thought we’d have a little positive fun. A game to help us create what we want for our writing -- or really for any part of our lives.

WHAT’S THE PLAN, STAN?
How many times have you sat down to write without knowing what you wanted to write? I’m not talking about plotting. I’m talking about sitting down and knowing where you plan to go with your writing time.

If you’re like me, wandering aimlessly happens far too often. I have lots of options about what to write, so it’s not due to lack of choices.

It’s also not about time. I have my writing time blocked out on my calendar, but I often sit down in front of my laptop and...well, quite honestly, since we’re doing the honesty thing now, I open Facebook. Or check the e-mail that I just checked ten minutes ago.

The problem isn’t procrastination. I really do want to write. But since I didn’t plan ahead, I’m staring at the screen without knowing which way to turn. Like a fork in the road. Which way you go is easy if you have a map of where you’re going, but if not, you can paralyze yourself with indecision.

The easiest way to avoid this lack of forward motion is to make a plan. Or, for a happier way to put it, you need to set Happy Intentions.

SETTING INTENTIONS MAKES YOU HAPPIER
Every part of life is a journey. A little journey -- rising from bed in the morning, getting the kids out the door to school, an important meeting at the day job, a potentially unpleasant conversation with a spouse, an hour of writing time, or coffee with a friend.

Our thoughts influence whether each of those mini journeys is Happy or not. Like tuning a radio dial in to just the right frequency, we can also dial our experiences in to just the right positive frequency by setting our intention to have a positive experience beforehand.
For example, to have a Happy Writing experience, rehearse what you want to happen ahead of time...in your head:

“When I sit down to write tomorrow at 10 a.m., I’m going to work on the first scene of chapter two. I’m really excited about this scene, even though it’s not perfectly clear in my mind right now. I know that I want X to happen, so I’m going to let my subconscious work on that until tomorrow. When I sit down to write, I’m going to feel really excited about it! I know it will go smoothly, and even if the words don’t flow out of me, I’m going to trust the process and just let go creatively.”

Didn’t that feel good? Well, the more you feel good about what you’re going to do, the better the chances you’ll actually feel good when you do it.

Setting Happy Writing Intentions is a great way to focus on what you want to have happen, instead of leaving it to chance or worrying that you’ll be swept up by other distractions (yeah, I’m talking to you, Facebook!).

The same applies for setting your intention to write at a certain time. Even if you don’t put the time on the calendar, if you’ve spent the past 24 hours getting excited about writing at 10 a.m. tomorrow morning, you’re more likely to be excited when the time comes than if you just put it out of your mind and hope for the best.

By deciding how well you want your writing sessions go and how you want to feel about them, your creativity can focus in on what you want to create instead of flitting around trying to figure out where to land.

**Some More Tips**

- **Go easy on yourself.** Setting Happy Writing Intentions can take practice, so don’t get frustrated if it doesn’t happen right away. Just keep trying. If nothing else, you’ll feel less anxious leading up to your writing times.

- **Be realistic.** Don’t put yourself under such enormous pressure that you can’t possibly accomplish what you’ve visualized. Like, don’t try visualizing yourself writing a whole chapter in a two-hour sitting if you have barely managed to write a page in that same amount of time up to this point. Work your way up gradually, patting yourself on the back for each new milestone.

- **Play your intentions like a movie in your head.** Visualize it like you might visualize a scene in your novel.
Focus on the feeling more than the goal. How do you want to feel about what you’ve written today? Even if you don’t meet a goal you may have intended, if you end up doing something better that makes you feel great, you’ve accomplished the feeling behind the intention, and that’s all that counts.

So, give it a try! Set a Happy Intention to walk away from all your writing times with a huge smile on your face and keep practicing until it becomes your reality.
DON’T FAKE IT TILL YOU MAKE IT

We’ve all heard the advice to “fake it ‘til you make it” before, right? The idea being that, even if we don’t feel happy, we should just put on a happy face until we feel happy.

Only apparently a bunch of scientists have found this can actually make us feel worse. And I totally agree with their conclusions. What? Isn’t that contradictory to what I’ve been talking about here at The Happy Writer? Not at all!

So the study was of a group of bus drivers (since they need to interact in a polite manner with large numbers of people during the course of their jobs). The Academy of Management Journal scientists studied drivers who purposely “fake smiled” their way through the day and found that their moods actually deteriorated. On the other hand, if the drivers actually made an effort to find pleasant thoughts to lift their spirits, the smiles were more genuine and their moods elevated.

Makes total sense to me. I’ll never advocate that you smile through your unhappiness. Being a Happy Writer isn’t about smiling through misery.

It’s about learning to think differently about the things that bother you.

It’s about looking for things to be happy about when not everything is bright and sunny.

It’s about wanting so badly to love what you do that you choose to find things to be happy about.

It’s about celebrating your successes, no matter how small.

It’s about remembering why you love writing, even when it’s difficult, and deciding that nothing is more important than enjoying it.

So, next time you get a rejection or have an unproductive writing day or life interferes and you can’t write at all, instead of plastering a smile on your face and telling yourself you’re a Happy Writer when you’re really not, maybe come back here and read a few of your favorite chapters, those that inspire you to think Happy Thoughts, and look for the Positive Aspects.

Because, in the long run, the happiness you choose has to be real. Insincere happiness, plastering a smile on your face while muttering angrily in your head, doesn’t count.
Put a little effort into nurturing positive thoughts and feelings and you won’t need to fake anything. You’ll find the Happy Writer buried inside.
WHAT’S YOUR WRITER SELF-IMAGE?

We all have a self-image. This isn’t necessarily an accurate portrayal of what is true, but how we perceive ourselves, which is made up of all kinds of things, from our past to our parents, our experiences and our interpretations.

One of the most detrimental things to us being Happy Writers can be a negative writing self-image.

Whatever your self-image is, your behavior will remain true to it almost all the time. Which means, if you think of yourself as a bad writer, that self-image dictates how you behave and your behavior reinforces your self-image.

We also tend to remain in the “comfort zone” of our self-image, even if it’s negative. A writer with a poor writing self-image, who then achieves a fast rise to the top of the bestseller lists, can come crashing down even more quickly, as they are uncomfortable with the contrast of the stardom to the self-image they have. Their behavior pulls them back to “where they belong.” Their self-image comfort zone.

WHAT IS SELF-IMAGE REALLY?
Self-image = Who we are AFRAID we are.

Think about that. This is especially true of your self-image is negative. Your self-image may be that you are a terrible writer. If you care about how well you write, then you put a lot of emotion behind the fear that that self-image may be true. (If you weren’t an aspiring writer, you wouldn’t be afraid of being a terrible writer, because it wouldn’t mean much to you.)

But we do care. So, the idea that we really might be a terrible writer -- our self-image -- terrifies us.

We don’t take into consideration that we have written some wonderful things. The good sentences tend to not affect our self-image as much as the bad sentences, right? Published authors may get dozens of great reviews, but that one bad review will have them desperately considering applying to flip burgers at Mickey D’s. Because it points to our terror that we are actually living up to our self-image.

MORE SELF-IMAGE SUPPORT
What you think of yourself is transmitted to others, too, who will reinforce your self-image. You
give off visual, verbal and emotional clues to -- not who you are -- but to your self-image. Who you believe you are. How others subsequently treat you then “confirms” for you that this must be the way you are.

“You are constantly letting other people know how to treat you by the way you treat yourself.”– Paul McKenna, Ph.D., Change Your Life in Seven Days.

I attended a writing workshop a few years ago, and the instructor had us doing some exercises and then sharing them with the class. There was one writer there who spent much of the day making self-deprecating remarks about her writing abilities. “Oh, you won’t want to read this. Sounds like a five-year-old wrote it.” “Better not call on me for this exercise...unless you want to show what not to do.” This went on much of the day, and she got quite a few laughs along the way, though I know it made some of us uncomfortable because we didn’t know what to say.

Two weeks after the class, she finaled in the top three of a pretty prestigious writing contest.

So why, if she was a good enough writer to final in a contest known for being a quality contest, was she constantly putting her writing down? My guess is that it was because of her self-image that she was a bad writer. She was terrified that it might be true, and she covered it up with humor. She might suck at writing, but she could get a good laugh.

Unfortunately, her portrayal of herself as a bad writer, if done in the wrong company -- like to an editor or agent -- would likely lead to a rejection. After all, if a writer doesn’t have confidence in their own writing, why should anyone else?

And each rejection earned on the basis of that lack of self-confidence just reinforces that self-image of being a lousy writer. Even if it isn’t true at all.

**The Self-Image Solution**

So how do you change your writer self-image? Here are a few steps you can take to help boost your self-image:

- Notice where your self-image is negative. If you find yourself thinking (or saying out loud) that you suck at writing or that you’ll never be published...start by just taking notice of this. No judgment. Just notice.
- Ask yourself where you may have developed this belief. Has someone told you in the past that you suck, at writing or anything else? Or have you placed a self-imposed time frame on yourself to become published that you haven’t yet met?
- Notice how your own actions, words, etc., may encourage others to reinforce your
negative self-image. Do you put yourself down to others? Even asking for critiques on something that’s not your best work can end up back-firing when the critique points out where you need work.

- Challenge your negative feelings. If, for example, you’ve pinpointed some of the cause of your negative self-image to the lack of support of family members who point out that you’ll “never make it,” realize that they are not the utmost authority. We can do anything we put our minds to, as long as we don’t give up. Dispute -- even just to yourself -- any negative opinions others have about you. List the reasons they might be wrong about you.

- Stop yourself. Call a halt to the behaviors you have that encourage others to agree with your poor self-image. Don’t belittle your writing efforts out loud *ever*. If you can’t say anything nice about yourself, don’t say anything at all.

- Notice the good stuff. You can turn your negative self-image into a positive one by noticing the good you do, the improvements you make, or even the areas outside of writing in which you excel. If you have learned to be a great parent, you can just as easily learn to be a great writer. (Pretty sure any writing parent would agree that raising kids is *much* more difficult than writing a book!)

- Practice being the writer you want to be. Defy your negative beliefs by being the opposite. If your self-image tells you you’re a lousy writer, then practice being a great writer. Sit down with the intention of being an awesome writer just for today. That doesn’t mean writing to perfection first try, because that’s not what being a great writer is about (it’s all in the editing...ask any writer!). It means that, just for this moment, you put your negative self-image in time-out and you play only with the positive writer inside you. It’s much more fun, believe me!
FOCUS POCUS

Why is it so much easier to focus on what we don’t want than what we do? It’s far simpler to think about failing, never being a good writer, never getting published, never making it big, than it is to imagine being successful and having the writing life we’ve always dreamed of.

Why is that? In part, it’s the way most of us were raised. Parents unintentionally instill a fear-based attitude on their children. We tell our kids, “Don’t run!” “Don’t interrupt!” “Don’t get wet!” Our parents did this to us and we do it to our own kids. It’s all done with good intention...we aren’t trying to scar them for life.

But, what this conditioning does is tend to make us fear negative outcomes rather than anticipate positive outcomes.

What that means to us as writers is that it comes more naturally to us to think about what we don’t want (I don’t want to fail! I don’t want to get rejected! I don’t want to work this day job forever!) than it does to hope for what we do want and move confidently toward our bright happy futures.

AN OBJECT IN MOTION STAYS IN MOTION

Unfortunately, the tendency is also there for our future thoughts to follow our current thoughts.

It’s like riding a bike down a steep hill. Once we’ve got the momentum going of habitually thinking of what we don’t want to have happen, it’s easier for similar thoughts to continue than it is to turn that bicycle around and pedal back up the hill our thoughts toward thinking about what we do want instead.

It’s actually a biological reaction. According to Laura Goodrich in Seeing Red Cars: Driving Yourself, Your Team, and Your Organization to a Positive Future: “Whichever direction our prominent thoughts lean -- either positively or negatively -- our brains produce chemical reactions that attract more of those outcomes.”

8 REASONS FOR NEGATIVE THINKING

Goodrich, who works from the principle that if you start looking for red cars, you will see red cars everywhere, says the same applies to our thoughts. If we notice negative thoughts, we will just naturally notice more negative thoughts.

According to Goodrich, there are 9 primary reasons changing our thought patterns is so
difficult. I’m only going to mention the 8 that I think really apply to us writers:

1. Ruts in the brain: The path of least resistance is the one we’ve been traveling. Getting out of that rut takes effort.
2. Unproductive Repetitive Behavior: It’s the repetitive nature of our thoughts and actions that creates ruts. They become habits and we are reassured by knowing what’s going to happen.
3. Comfort Zone: It doesn’t matter that we know these thoughts are nonproductive or harmful. We develop a familiarity that is difficult to break free from.
4. Lack of Neuropathways: It’s like there’s only one road in and out of our brains. Without other options of highways to travel, we take the same pathway we always take. We need to build alternative routes to our negative habits.
5. Fear: Every one of us has fears. We have to acknowledge them to move past them.
6. Lack of Clarity: Having only a vague sense of the direction you want to go leaves you unable to take the steps to get there. Only by knowing exactly what you want can you focus on the right thoughts to get you there.
7. Lack of Agility: When we haven’t been exercising right thought patterns, we get lazy. Our thought muscles go slack and make it harder to break free of our bad habits.
8. Unproductive Relationship Habits: We often find ourselves in relationships with people who reinforce our bad habits. When our friends and fellow writers have the same negative thought patterns we do, it makes positivity more difficult.

It’s becoming even more difficult to change our negative patterns of thought these days because of the vastly changing landscape of publishing. With e-books taking off and traditional publishing houses changing the way they do business, writers have even more uncertain futures. The fear of the unknown drives us to the relative “comfort” of our old thoughts, no matter how negative they are.

AIMING BACK UP THE HILL
Fortunately, though it’s harder to turn that bike around and start the trek back up the hill, it’s not impossible. It’s also not impossible to turn our thought patterns around and to start to think more about what we do want than what we don’t want.

We just need to retrain ourselves to think more about what we do want, which will just naturally begin to lead us more in that direction.

Goodrich says to: “Drive your actions toward positive outcomes by purposefully focusing on what you want instead of on what you are afraid of and trying to avoid. You get more of whatever you focus on.”
It can be scary to focus on what we want, because at the same time we need to make sure we aren’t making ourselves unhappy about the fact that we aren’t there yet. We need to keep the destination in sight while enjoying the journey.

Here are some of the ways we can begin to focus on what we want from our writing careers, paraphrasing ideas Goodrich presents in Seeing Red Cars:

1. Get out of the Ruts: Diligently start thinking new thoughts. Reframe how you see things as negative to positive. Tell yourself how you want things to be and where you want to go. Finding a new way of thinking is the first step to changing your thought patterns.

2. Create New Behaviors: Once you come up with some new ways of thinking, practice them. The more often you follow those new positive ways of thinking, the more they will be integrated into your regular thought patterns.

3. Take Baby Steps out of your Comfort Zone: You’re going to find it easier to ease your way into new thought patterns than to try to change all at once. Practice working on thinking about what you want from each of your writing sessions, for example, until it becomes more comfortable to you.

4. Creating New Neuropathways: Every tiny step you take out of your comfort zone and into your new positive way of thinking helps build new neuropathways. Soon you’ll think of more and more ways to creatively imagine what you want from your writing career.

5. Overcome Your Fears with Action: Once you’ve identified what you’re afraid of, you can analyze better and determine what steps you can take to conquer your fears.

6. Be Clear About What You Want: Get the specifics down on paper of what you do want. Ask yourself questions like, What does success look like for me? What projects do I want to work on? What other activities will I take part in to enhance my creative life?

7. Become More Agile: Flex those positive creativity muscles by taking that clarity you now have about what you want and imagine the outcome as if it had already happened. Imagine you’ve written a successful chapter (instead of thinking only about how difficult you think it might be), and talk about or write down what happened during its writing. How did you bring about a successful writing session? You will more easily accomplish the positive outcome if you’ve already played it out in your mind.

8. Hang With Positive People: Gravitate more toward people who make you smile and think positively about their writing careers. Their positivity will be catchy and help you keep the momentum of thinking about what you do want rather than what you don’t.

Once you’ve begun shifting those negative “don’t wants” to more positive “do wants” you might find that things begin to magically get better for you.

[Note: The book, Seeing Red Cars, is a book I read for review and really enjoyed. It’s meant for
team-building for businesses, but has some really fabulous worksheets for discovering what you want in every area of your life and how to take steps to get there by concentrating on what you do want instead of what you don’t.]
Happy Writers Don’t Reject Themselves

New York Times Bestselling author, Bob Mayer, spoke one night at my local RWA chapter. Before we got to talking about the topic at hand (plotting), he talked about career and the publishing industry, and self-publishing. He had some great words of wisdom, but one of them stuck out for me, because it had to do with something I’d written before on The Happy Writer.

Mayer said: “90% of people rejection themselves.”

I’ll let you absorb that for a minute.

My Rejection First Aid Kit talks about recovery from rejection by editors and agents, but I never even thought of how often authors reject themselves before they ever even have the opportunity to be rejected by an editor or agent.

How do they do this? They don’t follow through after a pitching appointment. Or after a contest final where the final agent/editor judge requests to see more of the work.

The Truth About Pitching
I’ll tell you right now, in the past, most editors and agents automatically asked you to send them your work if you met them in a pitching appointment. (Not all...I’ve found that the state of the economy and the publishing industry is making them pickier. This was the case at the last conference I went to and was one of the precipitating factors leading to me starting The Happy Writer.)

So, having a pitch appointment definitely increases your chance of skipping the query stage.

But this will only be to your benefit if you follow through.

What Mayer was shaking his head over were all the authors (90%, he estimates) who, when asked to submit their manuscript during a pitch appointment, NEVER SEND IN THEIR MANUSCRIPT.

They go home and chicken out. Suddenly, they’re not ready to show anyone, much less an editor or agent, their baby.

Suddenly, all those fears that haunt them are standing in front of them reminding them why they shouldn’t submit.
And when they listen to those voices...they reject themselves.

Don’t reject yourself.
**Ten Ways to Get Started Again**

I loved one of my guest posts on The Happy Writer. She shared a letter she’d written to her writer self of a decade ago, the self that quit writing. It was a great big smack in the face...’cause I’ve quit, too. Sometimes for years. Sometimes only weeks.

Sometimes days. And dammit, even days is too long.

Whatever your excuse was for quitting, legitimate (death in the family, moving house, hurricane) or illegitimate (it feels too hard, is taking too long, or you’re just get frustrated with all you don’t know about writing) it’s tough to set down the pen. But once done, it’s harder than heck to pick it up again. Doesn’t matter whether you quit for a week or a year...or ten years.

It can be an agonizing decision to start again, perhaps more agonizing than stopping.

I quit for a long time once, to have babies and work full time. I don’t recommend it (giving up the writing for babies and working, not the babies and working themselves). I felt like I couldn’t do all of that at the same time...not and avoid having Child Protective Services show up on my doorstep holding hands with a bill collector.

But really, I used them as an excuse to stop writing, because writing was hard. And I didn’t get that most things worth doing are hard.

It’s not like I didn’t do anything else but burp babies and slave over typing medical documents during that time off from writing, either. In my downtime, I tole painted and crafted. There’s a couple of afghans kicking around that I managed to find the time for, as well as some seriously intricate counted cross-stitch pictures hanging over my parents’ mantel.

But I have no writing to show for those years...and, like my guest on The Happy Writer, I frequently think, “What if I’d kept going? Where would I be in my career right now?” That, and, “What the hell was I thinking?!”

It doesn’t have to be an extended absence from the writing world that waylays you either. It doesn’t even have to be a conscious decision to quit. It could be a matter of just thinking you’re too tired today or that running errands is more important. Tomorrow when it’s writing time again, it’s just a tiny bit more difficult to get going. The day after, you’re getting kind of comfortable with this extra time.

I think we’ve gone over this before...how easy it is to quit. Let’s not even get into that. You quit.
I quit. We all quit sometimes. Let’s figure out how to fix it.

GETTING STARTED AGAIN
Here are some ways to trick yourself into getting writing again...because sometimes that’s just what it takes:

1. Set a ridiculously low goal. Like 1 paragraph a day, 1 sentence. So low that you’d have to hang your head in shame not to get it done. There’s no excuse not to write a paragraph a day. You can do it in the bathroom if you need to.
2. Don’t write. Brainstorm instead. Write down as many ideas as you can think of to write about when you do start writing again. (It’ll trick you into getting excited and inspired to do the actual writing.)
3. Skip over the hard stuff. When you get writing and things stall you (like a sex scene you really don’t want to write, because you just changed a dirty diaper and you’re just not feeling it), skip it. Instead, leave a blank, such as [insert sex scene here] or [XXX], which is easy to search for later. Hint: Don’t forget to go back and fill in those blanks later. I had a friend who once used [insert sex scene here] and forgot to do so, earning her a frustrated call from her editor later for getting her all hot and bothered and then not delivering. The point is, don’t let the hard stuff make you stop again.
4. Time yourself. Timers work wonders. Even I can write for 15 minutes.
5. Hold hands. If you need your hand held to get anything done, set up writing sprints with friends online. Thirty minutes of heads-down words on a page. Ready, set, go! Everything’s more fun with a partner and the competition alone may get you going again.
6. Re-read your old stuff. I love discovering something I wrote a while ago and realizing I don’t recognize it...and I like it! It inspires me to get going again.
7. Don’t push it. There’s no reason to go from 0 to 60 in one day. Start small and work your way up again, flexing those writing muscles gradually. No need to give yourself a Charlie horse trying to get back up to your previous levels too quickly.
8. Use tough love. Don’t call yourself a writer until you’re actually writing again. Being a “writer” implies action. So if you’re not taking the action...
9. Write anything. When you’re just getting started again, you don’t have to work on your Great American Novel. It’s only important that you get words on the page to get that habit going again...write poems, write a letter to your best friend or mortal enemy, write dirty limericks. Just write.
10. Exercise. (Not physically, lord no! I’m no masochist!) I mean exercise your fingers and your brain by copy-typing a scene from a book. I tried this the other day after breaking from writing, and it felt really good...I just picked a book (one that stayed open easily on its own or you could use an e-reader) and started copying the scene. It’s not about plagiarism. It’s about tricking your mind into thinking you’re writing. Once it starts to
feel good, delete what you typed from somebody else’s book and start writing your own. Your fingers are warmed up now and your mind is thinking about words and scenes. It’s actually fun!

So, there are 10 ideas to get going again. I hope some of them are unique. If one doesn’t work, try a different one. Because we’re each hard-headed in a different way, what works for one of you might not work for another.

The important thing is not how fast you go when you’re getting started again…it’s that you start.
HAPPY ATTENTION

Why is it that, so often, no matter what we are doing, we think we would be happier doing something different? Sometimes it’s that grass-is-greener syndrome. Sometimes it’s guilt over what we think we should be doing. Sometimes it’s worry we need to be doing something different.

No matter what form it takes, it’s all about attention.

While in the midst of giving your writing attention to the amazing love story you’re writing, you are, of course, not writing that mile-a-minute thriller you have niggling at the back of your mind. While you’re networking at a writers’ conference, being inspired and refilling your well of motivation, you can’t be simultaneously in your hotel room cranking out chapter 12. You can’t attend your child’s birthday party and actively search for your dream agent at the same time.

But in each of these instances, if your attention is divided between where you are and somewhere else, you aren’t actually doing justice to either activity. If your mind is on that thriller, your lovers are going to feel neglected. If your mind is back in your hotel room beating yourself up for not working on chapter 12, you may completely miss that the woman who just drew you into a conversation might, in fact, be an editor looking for exactly what you write.

And don’t think your child won’t notice that your mind is a million miles away focusing on how to word your query letter during their birthday party. This is one case where, believe me, they will notice.

When our attention is divided, nothing is getting all of you, which means you won’t be fully enjoying anything nor giving anything the best of your ability.

WHAT’S WITH ATTENTION?

In 1890, William James, in his textbook Principles of Psychology, remarked: “Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought.”

I’m sure James had no idea in 1890 all the things humans would invent that could take possession of their minds and try to divide their attention. We’re stimulated from all sides, made to feel like we have to accomplish more, more, more, faster, faster, faster. It’s a wonder we can ever focus our attention on anything long enough to complete a task...or enjoy it.
I’ve talked about this before, but I feel it’s really a difficulty for writers. Up until a few months ago, I had a hard time separating my day job and my writing. Working at home made it even worse. While I tried to keep my attention on my day-to-day job tasks (for which I was paid based on how much I produced), I was pulled, instead, in a hundred different directions.

I felt that keeping up with my e-mail between job tasks would make things easier on me. I kept a document open on my desktop to take story notes as they popped into my mind. I checked Facebook a dozen times a day and, if something caught my attention, it might mean a half hour worth of surfing before I remembered that I was actually supposed to be working.

I never gave my full attention to my job OR my writing, or anything else for that matter. Because I was paid on production, I had to work longer hours to earn the money I wanted to earn. And truthfully? I wasn’t keeping up with anything or making anything easier on myself. Because my attention wasn’t clearly on one thing or another at any given time, none of it was done well or efficiently, and certainly not with any joy.

One day, though, I realized I wasn’t getting anywhere. I hated my job for the most part (other than the fact that I could do it at home), I was getting no closer to my financial goals because I wasn’t making the money I could, I wasn’t writing as much as I wanted, so my dream career was suffering. I needed to change.

So I made a list of what would make me happy.

- To work at my day job during the hours designated to work at my day job only.
- To have enough money to pay my bills.
- To have more writing time.

After a few days of thought, it occurred to me that all of those things could be accomplished by giving each my full attention. If I focused on my day job while working my day job, I would make more money in fewer hours, thus making enough to pay bills. Fewer hours would mean more writing time in the short-term and paying off bills would mean the possibility of working fewer hours in the future, giving me even more writing time.

In other words, it was all about getting to the point where I gave my full attention to whatever I was doing at a given moment.

I am happy to say that I more than accomplished what I set out to do. I made more money at my day job than I’d ever made before and worked fewer hours. Fewer hours at the day job meant I felt comfortable asking for a rearrangement of my work hours to give me even more writing time. A double win!
On top of all that, there were other benefits of focusing my attention: I began to really enjoy my day job again. The burden it felt like before had been lifted. I felt well paid for my efforts, and I didn’t feel like a slave to it anymore. My writing times became precious and I gave my writing my full attention, thus, wrote more and better than I had for years.

GETTING TO ATTENTION
Here are few steps you can take to engaging your full attention to whatever you’re doing. Because believe me, this will help you on the path to becoming a Happy Writer:

- Decide what you want to do (and that includes needs like day jobs, etc.) and what you want out of it. What is important to you and why? By deciding what you want to do and why, you automatically motivate yourself.
- Compartmentalize. By giving each activity, whether it be a book, a job, a conference or a birthday party, its own compartment, you help narrow your focus. When you are in the work compartment, you work. When you are in the writing compartment, you write. Time will go faster and you’ll be more creative.
- Give yourself permission to enjoy whatever you are doing. Focus solely on the fabulous book you are writing right now...on the chapter, the page, the paragraph. Everything else will be there later, and giving all of your attention to this one thing will ensure a better outcome. With a better outcome on what you’re working on how, you’ll feel better about your writing skills and, thus, more confident when you do move on to that thriller at a later date.

Imagine following the steps above and see if just the imagining of the success they will bring doesn’t make you a Happy Writer.
**THE SWING OF THINGS**

I realized something about myself this morning...I’m a creature of habit.

I should have known this. I have long despised dealing with people who won’t make plans ahead of time so that I can get something on my calendar. I don’t often do anything spur of the moment. I keep a pretty tight schedule -- even if it includes free time, I still don’t want that free time messed with. I like my swing to swing in one predictable direction only.

*Swing.*

After a rough morning with my newly high-school-aged son -- who needed *the-picture-we-can’t-find* printed RIGHT NOW, who couldn’t locate the PE shirt that he just had yesterday, who forgot to take the garbage to the street before he left for school, which necessitated me getting out of my PJs and racing to the bottom of our very long, steep driveway with crazy hair and before my coffee -- I tried consoling myself with the reassurance that we’d get back into the swing of things soon. Please God, *soon.*

*Swing.*

As you can tell by my lack of posts lately, I’ve gotten sidetracked...by my manuscript, so that’s a good thing, but I’ve not been posting on The Happy Writer, so that’s a bad thing. Over the summer, I created some good writing habits...working my day job for 3 hours, taking a 3-hour break to write 5 days a week at Starbucks, then finishing up my day job.

I’ve been writing again, which is fabulous after a pretty long break from it.

But, being a creature of habit, I’ve stuck strictly to that schedule and anything that disrupts it, including things like writing blog posts, has not been tolerated.

**FORCED TO TAKE A BREAK**

For all my lovely, lovely progress, though, suddenly September loomed and I remembered deadlines I have coming up...a workshop that I needed to write and prepare for by mid-September, a magazine article with an October 1 deadline, another workshop to write and prepare for by the end of October.

I realized I’d have to set aside my manuscript for a few weeks to get this other -- very important! -- stuff done.
It was like cutting off a limb.

Swing.

I didn’t want to break my new writing habit. Mostly out of fear I’d never be able to get back to it. (I’m still a bit terrified of that!) But, I didn’t have a choice.

So, last week, I put aside the book I’m loving and making good progress on, and wrote my first workshop. It felt great to have that done, so I anticipated this week to be much the same. Productive, productive, productive.

Uh, not so much. There was a holiday, which fell after I’d worked 36 days with only 2 days off, so I was ready for some lazy time. School started yesterday, so I had last-minute shopping to do for that over the weekend. And then there was getting back to work, which was scattered and unpredictable due to the holiday, so sticking to a schedule was impossible.

Then there was having to get out of my PJs before nine a.m. this morning. With crazy hair and no coffee.

Swing.

Sigh. It’s Thursday, and I’ve done nothing this week toward the article I need to write. Which means it’s highly likely I’ll have to take another week off from working on my book.

Swing.

What will it take to get off this thing?

Only, do I really want off this swing of life? Will getting off it really make me Happy? Not really. I want to write this article and give these workshops and work on this manuscript and...be spontaneous and get in the swing of things no matter which direction they’re swinging.

I want to talk to a friend on the phone without feeling like the whole day from that point on is “off” somehow because I broke from the schedule.

I want to accept challenges that are exciting to me instead of turning them down because they might cause me to deviate from the path I’ve been on.

I want to step away from the manuscript knowing I won’t lose anything in the process and that
I have the ability to come back to it revitalized and with fresh insights from the break I’ve taken from it.

**GETTING USED TO IT**

If you have the same trouble I do, let’s form a club and just get used to it. Published authors put up with swinging wildly back and forth all the time. In the midst of a flowing-smoothly new manuscript, copy-edits show up on their desk with a one-week deadline. Then, as soon as those are done and they’re back in the groove, here come the galleys, or promotional duties, or illness or...CRAP THE CAT JUST ESCAPED! (No, I’m not kidding about that...it just took me 10 minutes to get her back in the house and another 20 trying to guess how she got out. Still don’t know. And I walked through 2 spider webs trying to figure it out. *shudder* Grrr...swing.)

Resolving this is going to take some reframing. Maybe just some acceptance. After all, kids on a playground swing don’t insist that the swing only go forward, right. It’s the backward swing and the swoop forward again that gives the thrill.

I’m on a life swing and the “swing of things” will always be back and forth and back and forth and this and that and the other thing. Even when on a real swing, the only way to slow it down is to work with the momentum to slow it down. Or jump, and I find I don’t really want to get off......I just want more control.

Maybe control is about acceptance that the swing will keep moving and I can fight it...or just Happily enjoy the ride.
IT’S ALL GOOD

I spent last weekend at the Emerald City Writers’ Conference put on by the Greater Seattle Romance Writers of America. It was after this conference last year that I came up with the idea for The Happy Writer.

This year, it was as fabulous as ever, with speakers that made us laugh and cry, and workshop presenters that made us think and taught us something.

I love visiting with friends, old and new, eating great food, and sharing writing triumphs and tragedies.

And there were a few tragedies (not earthquake-killing-thousands-of-people tragedies, but writerly tragedies).

I heard from more than one published friend that their book series’ hadn’t been renewed by their publisher. Man, can I sympathize. After all, my poor Venus trilogy only has two books. Getting dropped before finishing your story sucks, let me tell you.

I heard from unpublished writers who were still unpublished, though another year had passed, and they struggled to keep going. It’s inevitable whenever writers gather that there will be bad stuff mixed in with the good.

But I got an e-mail, which really spoke to me, rather fortuitously, on Saturday night before I gave my Happily Unpublished talk on Sunday morning. Even though it had nothing to do with writing, I shoved it into my writer’s slot and shared my take on it during my talk.

The gist of it was this: “Everything that happens to you as a writer now is part of the writer you’re becoming. Every person you meet and engage with, every positive and every negative. Not just the good stuff.”

We often think that only the good stuff is important to catalogue regarding our writing. We cheer for those “good” rejections or connecting with an editor who shows interest in our book premise. But what about that nasty rejection that makes us cry? What about that douche-bag reviewer who calls our writing just so much garbage they wouldn’t even recommend it to their worst enemy? Those aren’t important.

Or are they?
New York Times Bestselling author Sherrilyn Kenyon, who gave the keynote during lunch on Saturday, has had so much bad crap happen in her life and in her writing career you’d think she was making it up. But she isn’t. She actually had an editor send a rejection letter to her agent that said something along the lines of, “We will never ever want to buy anything from this writer. Don’t waste our time submitting in the future.”

Bet that editor kicks her own sorry behind every time she sees Kenyon’s name in the New York Times in that #1 slot.

After sopping up the tears brought on by listening to Kenyon recount horror after horror that had happened to her (through incredulous laughter and a few tears of her own), I saw that (paraphrased) quote in my e-mail.

Which translated for me to the realization that everything that happens to us in our writing career, every person we meet, every positive, as well as every negative, is all part of the writer we are becoming.

Had an author stood before all of us and told us that she sold the first book she wrote (which, of course, she’d written on a whim over a long weekend at her family’s mansion in the Hamptons), that it was sold at auction, with editors showering her with dump trucks full of money just to make her part of their author pool, that she’d hit #1 on the NYT list before the book was even printed and that she’d never suffered rejection, heartbreak, family issues, or money problems like the rest of us, because she was just too damn good for that kind of stuff, etc., oh, and that she has her own personal fairy godmother sprinkling magic sparkle dust on her every morning, we’d have said, “Bitch, PLEASE.”

It was precisely the fact that that’s not how it happened for Kenyon that makes her the writer she is today...the inspiration she is today. It’s the hard times and the rejections (including the nastiest rejection I’ve ever heard) and the struggles she had that made us cry and want to try harder ourselves.

Every negative thing that happened to her, as much as the positive things (or maybe even more so), made her the Happy Writer she is today.

Your struggles are doing the same for you.

What’s the takeaway? That you shouldn’t discount the hard stuff as unimportant. Everything not so great (or downright horrible) that we survive has something to bring to the table. A lesson, the motivation to keep going, the determination to flat out prove it wrong.
While I can’t really tell you to *embrace* the bad stuff -- because that’s a bit like asking you to hug the rattlesnake you happen to have the crappy luck to run into -- I can tell you not to dismiss the bad stuff. I can tell you to look for the lesson, the motivation, the determination that you might be able to mine from that deep dark cave you find yourself temporarily trapped in.

I can tell you to use some of the tools in this book on reframing and considering the journey, not just the goal, and writing down the positive aspects of whatever is happening in your life.

I can tell you that whatever happens to you today is part of the creation process of the writer you’re becoming.

And, as my friends and I like to say when something really crappy happens, “Someday this’ll be fodder for the keynote speech I’m asked to present.”

So, take notes. When the lesson buried in the crap becomes apparent, note that, too, so you don’t forget it. And when you’re asked to give the keynote someday, to inspire and motivate future writers, you’ll be grateful for all you have to share -- positives and negatives -- that helped shape you as a writer.

May I suggest a new Happy Writer mantra...it’s ALL good.
**HAPPY CONCLUSION**

As writers, no matter what we write, we tell a story. Whether it’s fiction or nonfiction, magazine articles or poetry. We invite people into our stories, ask them to engage with us and, hopefully, come back to engage with us again later, for the next chapter.

The way to be a Happy Writer is to realize that each and every time we write, each time we interact with anyone, we are writing our story. We’re telling our story to ourselves and to others by our attitudes, our words and our actions.

**WHAT KIND OF CHARACTER DO YOU WANT TO BE?**

We should always be the main characters in the story of our life. If others are too influential or seem to play too big a role, something needs to change.

Larger than life secondary characters in a novel can detract from the main character’s story. A lesser topic in an article that gets too much attention can diminish the article’s main topic. In both of these cases, adjustments need to be made to bring the focus back where it belongs.

The great thing is that you get to decide what kind of character you want to be in the story of your writing life. Do you want to be a writer, trudging along, taking the negative blows and figuring they’re your due, and suffering for your art? Or do you want to be a Happy Writer?

It’s for you alone to decide. Once you realize this, the rest gets easier.

**WRITING YOUR HAPPY WRITER STORY**

Like I said back at the beginning of the book, all writers have something they feel unhappy about and all writers want to be inspired. We want to be Happy Writers.

As you’ve read in this book, becoming a Happy Writer is all about how you look at things, what you focus on...and whether you’re willing to write your story the way you want it to be. Others will try to influence you, try to tell you you should feel afraid or negative or unhappy. There’s a lot about writing and publishing that’s not much fun, at least depending on how you look at it.

And therein lies the trick. It’s all in how you look at it, what you focus on, and how you perceive things.

One of the best things about writing is the ability to REwrite. Revision may not be fun for a lot of people (it’s my favorite part!), but *in revision is freedom*. Revision/editing allows us to change
the things that didn’t turn out quite the way we expected when we wrote them the first time. It allows us to take our characters on a different path if the original path didn’t lead where we wanted it to...or if we got a bit adventurous and found that the detour we took on a whim was better than our original plan.

We can use the same revision techniques in our writing life as we do in our writing.

Unhappy with your publisher? You can choose to go with a different publisher in the future...or even self-publish.

Unhappy with the genre you’re writing in? You can write something different. Take risks, experiment, write what thrills and excites you.

Unhappy with the writing atmosphere you’re exposed to? Change it up. Find a new writing group, new critique partners, attend a different writers’ conference than you’ve attended for the last five years. Seek out like-minded Happy Writers who look for the positive aspects of writing. (Simply editing this one element of the story of your writing life will make a world of difference.)

Just a few tweaks here and there can make an enormous difference in your happiness as a writer. But you have to be willing to make those adjustments in your focus, your habits, and your view of things.

What I always want you to remember, though, is that YOU are in control. If you’re not happy right this moment, decide to be happy in the next moment and the next one after that. The more happy moments you have, the healthier your Happy Habits are in general, the happier you’ll be on a regular basis.

For all of you Happy Writers, I wish you to remember the joy that writing brings to you. I wish you to remember, above all, that you can CHOOSE to be happy at any moment and every moment.

Happily,

Shannon
RESOURCES MENTIONED IN THIS BOOK

BOOKS

Michael Neill, Supercoach: 10 Secrets to Transform Anyone’s Life

Sonja Luybomirsky, The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want

Barbara L. Fredrickson, Ph.D, Positivity: Groundbreaking Research Reveals How to Embrace the Hidden Strength of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity, and Thrive

Shawn Achor, The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work

Cathy Yardley, Write Every Day: How to Write Faster, and Write More (Rock Your Writing)

Srikumar Rao, Ph.D., Happiness at Work: Be Resilient, Motivated, and Successful - No Matter What

Seth Godin, Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?

Tal Ben-Shahar, Ph.D., The Pursuit of Perfect: How to Stop Chasing Perfection and Start Living a Richer, Happier Life

Paul McKenna, Ph.D., Change Your Life in Seven Days

Laura Goodrich, Seeing Red Cars: Driving Yourself, Your Team, and Your Organization to a Positive Future

William James, Principles of Psychology

Gretchen Rubin, The Happiness Project


Alan Epstein, Ph.D., How to Be Happier Day by Day

Jonathan Fields, Uncertainty: Turning Fear and Doubt into Fuel for Brilliance
Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*

**ARTICLES**
Sonja Luybomirsky, “Happiness Breeds Success...and Money“ and “Is it Possible to Become Lastingly Happier?”

Hara Estroff Marano, “Why We Procrastinate“

Gretchen Rubin, “Reframing“

**VIDEOS**
Elizabeth Gilbert, “Nurturing Creativity“

Srikumar Rao, Ph.D., “Plug Into Your Hard-Wired Happiness“

Shawn Achor, “Reprogramming Your Brain To Be Happier“
I hope you enjoyed The Happy Writer: Life’s Hard. Write Happy! I’d love to hear how it helped you, what you learned, or any suggestions you might have. You can let me know by contacting me at Shannon@ShannonMcKelden.com.

If you’d like to be part of the Happy Writer community and stay up to date on future information, please join us on Facebook.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shannon McKelden is also the author of three humorous romantic novels and countless parenting articles, as well as The Happy Writer Book series. She lives with her family a short drive from both the ocean and the mountains in the beautiful Pacific Northwest.

To find out more about Shannon’s novels, click here.

Other books by Shannon McKelden

The Happy Writer book series:

- Rejection First Aid Kit
- Ready, Set, Write: The Happy Writer's Guide to Craft
- Write This Way: The Happy Writer's Guide to the Publishing Business

Women’s Fiction:

- The Kiss Test