



Postponing Procrastination

By Colleen Patrick
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Writer-director-producer Colleen Patrick's screenplay *The Director* was a quarter-finalist in this year's Cine-Story competition; last year her screenplay *The Lucky Penny* finished in the top 10% of Austin's Heart of the Film competition, and she was a finalist in the Disney script-writing competition with a "Frasier" script, *The Hero*.

Colleen's feature script *Into Thin Air* was optioned by Landis Productions (US) in 1998. Colleen is a former president and international liaison for the Seattle chapter of Women In Film.

Colleen's short film, which she wrote, directed and produced, *Life As Art* was an official 1997 Academy Award submission. She has written, produced and directed four short films, the most recent a pilot for the series, *Behind The Movie Screen*, a mockumentary associated with her feature, *The Director*. The pilot can be seen at <www.director3.com>.

She is currently in development as writer/director with her feature, *The Director*. Colleen is a successful on-camera acting coach who also successfully coaches writers. One of her writers was recently picked up by a major New York agent; 12 publishers are interested in the writer's book. Colleen will be writing the screenplay based on the book.

She is the author of two published books, *Mind Over Media*, (CHEF Publishing) and *The 100% Solution* (Meadow Brook Publications).

She has received awards for writing, directing and journalism. A former journalist, Colleen was featured in the 1985 *World Who's Who* of Women published from Cambridge, England.

Face it.

We all put off completing something we ought to do.

If you delay washing dishes, doing the laundry or cleaning the den, there is no real penalty.

But postpone a writing project—or two or three? Procrastination can be the anathema of a writing career.

If your deadline is self-imposed, you are free to decide whether you want to meet it.

If, however, others dictate your due date, someone is counting on you to produce a script—the bedrock of any production. Nothing starts without the written word, even if it's just the outline for a film of improvised dialogue.

Faux Procrastination Is Essential

A particularly *peculiar* procrastination problem crops up for writers when we appear to be dawdling, but in reality we're hard at work.

We need time to analyze what we've researched or investigated; what we want to say and how we want to say it. What do we want the outcome to look like? How would we like to create it?

After all our exploration, character studies, interviews, location visits and necessary reading, we must take time to assimilate all that material.

We need to digest, to ponder, ...to compose. I liken this step of the creative process to a gestation period, with each one of us having an individual mulling schedule before giving "birth" to the new undertaking.

Major problems can occur, however, if the writer can't move from this contemplative phase into taking action within a reasonable period of time.

When you have the discipline to follow through with a realistic timeline to advance into measurable action, actually writing the project, you can do a "labor of lounge" guilt-free.

The Habit of Getting It Done—Now!

At the risk of pissing you off because you think this is an oversimplification, this is what I've discovered in my research, work and coaching practice:

Procrastination is a bad habit.

Getting the work done is a good habit.

The regrettable result of this bad habit is wasted time, missed opportunities, poor performance, not living up to your potential, feeling bad about yourself and beating yourself up. Some turn to drug abuse to deal with this self-inflicted pressure.

Acquiring the Accomplishment Habit

In my coaching practice, I've identified a four-step plan to acquire the habit of good work:

- 1) Keep your word to yourself.
- 2) Understand why you hurt yourself and your work by putting it off.
- 3) Establish your own individual step-by-step creation and writing plan.
- 4) Establish meaningful rewards to reinforce your new, successful work habits.

The bottom line:

Keep Your Word

The writers and actors I coach run into procrastination problems because they don't keep their word to themselves.

They say they will do something, and of course don't. So they build the habit of breaking their word to themselves. Then they consider themselves untrustworthy. This becomes a habitual cycle of self-defeat that looks like this:

Postpone work they say they will do—rush getting the task done at the last minute—the output lacks the quality it should have—*disappointment*—self-berating.

This self-destructive behavior can start early if these writers had adults in their lives who constantly broke their word to them as children.

Here's the system I suggest to acquire the habit of keeping your word.

- 1) It may sound silly, but, write a short list of things you *must*

do each day. Like wake up, brush teeth, eat, whatever you have to do to live. Write the date and “what I want to do” at the top of the sheet. You’ll need a separate sheet for each day.

2) Check off each of these items as you do them every day. Put the completed list in a place you see often during your day. They will pile up—reminding you of the number of days you have kept your word to yourself.

3) Be accountable. Check-in with someone you trust when your daily list is finished. It will feel good sharing the fact that you kept your word to yourself, that you haven’t let yourself down, disappointed yourself or needed to berate yourself.

4) Reward yourself in some positive, meaningful way. This part is essential. How can you reward yourself daily? Watching your favorite video? A candlelight dinner? A jog in your favorite park? Whatever it is, it should make you feel congratulated for doing a good thing for yourself.

5) Keep making and checking off this list every day for two weeks. You will be shocked at how good you will feel.

6) Beginning the third week, add ONE task you want to do daily that you know you will do—like walking your dog.

7) Beginning the fourth week, add one new, different task every day that needs to be done on that day only.

8) At this point, you are ready to start adding specific tasks you must do for your writing career or project. Never list any more than 10 items on your daily “to do” list. Do not agree to do *anything* you know you will not or cannot do. Don’t agree to do something you’re “not sure” you can do.

Repeat after me: “I’m sorry, I can’t do that right now.” Don’t put yourself in the position of forcing yourself to break your word. Even people who are upset at the moment prefer to hear an honest “no,” than a dishonest, “sure,” only to be let down by you.

If you follow these suggestions, your attitude about yourself and your work will become more positive, confident and motivated. In the vast majority of cases, people who follow these advised exercises end up keeping their word to others as well as themselves—creating some great changes in personal relationships.

Why Do I Put It Off?

Some reasons for postponing important work are: seeking perfection—which is unattainable; feelings of inadequacy; not knowing how to begin; waiting for “inspiration” or “motivation;” future tripping or the need for immediate gratification.

Perfectionist: This person demands so much from himself that he implodes from a useless, stressful endeavor.

Antidote: To become better at an art or craft,

there needs to be considerable experimentation, practice and skill building. Give yourself permission to take things one step at a time; to crawl before walking. It requires patience and dedication. The more talented the person, the more capable he is of developing his creative muscle—therefore the more he can practice.

Basketball phenomenon Michael Jordan practiced an additional hour before and after all the other players did. His colleagues said that was what surprised them most about him. He had the least “reason” to practice because he is so inherently talented. But Jordan wasn’t satisfied to just ‘do well’. He needed to do his *best*. He was his own competition.

Do you need to do your very best?

Are you your own competition?

People who compare themselves to anyone else—ever—will lose, because we are not other people. Everyone excels at one thing and needs to pick up the slack somewhere else. As writers, we can emulate and admire William Goldman or Jane Campion. Studying their work can be extraordinarily helpful and instructive. But if we extend that veneration into the realm of comparison, we will feel horrible about ourselves.

Why not just do the best you can, advancing your craft daily? If you do, perhaps one day you can replace them in the eyes of people you respect in the industry! You will be acknowledged for being you, not another (fill in the name).

Feelings of inadequacy: When we don’t feel we’re capable of performing a task well, when we don’t know enough, we can evade the task all together in order to avoid feeling badly about our shortcoming.

Antidote: We don’t actually have to admit we don’t know something as long as we just dig in and find out how the heck to do the work properly and well.

Face the music. Listen to the lyrics: “I’m supposed to do this and it beats the hell out of me how I’m supposed to get it done, let alone how to do it well. That’s scary. Wooo-wooo-wooo.”

As difficult as it is to admit *to yourself* that you don’t know what you’re doing (even to some degree), the first time is the worst. After that, it gets easy, because you’ve got a system to educate yourself—to find out how to get the job done and done well. Reach out. There are thousands of places to get help online alone.

Not knowing how to begin: If this is the way you feel, remember that a beautiful mansion is still built one brick at a time.

Antidote: People who encounter this problem usually see the overwhelming big picture, so they feel drowned before they’ve set their little toe in the water.

Break down what you need to do in little brick sizes in order to accomplish the project. Separate each general task area, then make a list of smaller jobs under each main heading.

Not properly prioritizing tasks: People who concentrate on the least important tasks and then find themselves up against the wall as their deadline draws near panic because there is so much significant work that is unfinished. They’ve put off the most crucial part of the project—the part that ought

to have been done first!

Antidote: I suggest working “backward” That is, figure out what the project will look like when it is completed. What are the most important elements? After you’ve identified them, trace what needs to be done backward: from the completed work to the beginning of getting underway.

Waiting for “inspiration” or “motivation:” If I waited for “inspiration” or “motivation,” I’d get very little accomplished. We have to generate our own inspiration and motivation. If there’s something you can use as a reminder of why you write—a book, a script, a video, a photograph—something that reminds you of your goal—that you can see all the time, that should help.

Antidote: Professional writers are inspired and motivated by the desire to write (even on bad days), deadlines, the need to keep up a good writing regimen, to keep our “chops” sharp, and out of habit. I write seven days a week, no matter what.

Future tripping: This phenomenon takes place when people catapult themselves into the ultimate and most horrific final outcome of what they are pursuing. One of the actors I coached was paralyzed by fear from future tripping. He could not do the work.

The reason? “I can’t handle the lifestyle.”

“What lifestyle?” I asked.

“You know, all the publicity, studio politics, people after all the time, no privacy, the tabloids.”

Mind you, he had only taken his first two acting lessons—ever—from me. And already he projected himself into troubles suffered by a few dysfunctional stars.

I reminded him that in order to suffer any of those things, he had to get some work first. And that he couldn’t get any work unless he did his acting homework.

When he focused on simply doing his homework, the stuff to build his craft—he was fine. And I told him if he did become a star, he could decide just how much he wanted to be in the public eye.

The need for immediate gratification: If you’re more interested in having fun and seeking pleasure-filled activities, you’ll put off focusing on the hard work that needs to be done in order to succeed.

Antidote: Find the pleasure in becoming a fine writer; the joy of the writing process (even when it hurts).

Rewards Are Sweet!

This step is the one most often neglected—but unless you reward yourself and look forward to this perk, the chance of backsliding is great.

What makes you feel good? What makes you feel especially good about yourself? Come up with a list so you can refer to it when you might forget how to congratulate yourself.

When Do I Start?

If you’ve done anything suggested in this column—you’ve already begun to put off procrastination and replace it with the habit of self-respect and all its subsequent success. ■