



Don't be afraid of striking out

In writing, as in baseball, you have to stick with it to hit one out of the park

I'm a Little League Baseball coach. I'm also a writer, and the two have more in common than you might suspect. In both baseball and writing, you often fail more than you succeed, a hard but important lesson my son taught me. When Joe turned 9, he moved to minor-league baseball, in which players pitch to the batter rather than the batter hitting the ball off a tee. It is a big adjustment.

The first game that year, Joe stepped to the plate, and like many of his teammates, he struck out. Paralyzed by the thought that he might swing and miss, he never took the bat off his shoulder. As he walked back to the dugout, I tried to be the good coach, shouting encouragement: "That's OK, Joe. We're just having fun here." A few innings later, Joe stepped up to the plate again. And again the bat remained on his shoulder. Again I offered encouragement. "No problem, Joe. Good try. We're just having fun." When Joe got up a third time and again the bat never moved, my mantra was well-rehearsed. "Hey, great try, Joe. We're just ..." Cutting me off, tears in his eyes, Joe shouted, "Dad! It's no fun striking out all the time."

My son was right. It is no fun striking out all the time. It's no fun feeling like a failure. As a writer, I should have been more sympathetic. I had struck out many times.

In baseball, if you are going to play, you must accept that you will strike out. The statistical odds can't be ignored. It doesn't mean you're a bad player. In fact, if you get a hit just three times out of 10, you're considered very good. Writing is also a profession of failure. Rejection is, at some level, inevitable. As writers, we can't become paralyzed at the thought of

rejection. We can't fear it, or seek to avoid it. Rather, we must confront it head on, charge into it with reckless abandon. We must look at rejection like a ball player looks at striking out, that thin line between trying and succeeding, a line we must cross as many times as necessary, knowing that on the other side exist our dreams and goals.

In terms of my career, I bridged that thin line by learning the three P's—patience, perseverance and persistence.

Patience

I have known that I wanted to write novels since the seventh grade. But I am also the product of a large family of compulsive overachievers, and so I felt compelled to attend graduate school after college. I decided to attend the UCLA School of Law, and knew within the first three weeks of classes that I had made a mistake, that practicing law was not going to satisfy me. But compulsive overachievers don't quit. So for three years, I gutted out the law-school experience, and, like my classmates, I sought out the best jobs. Before I knew it, I was on that treadmill—and I was running.

I accepted a job at a fast-growing San Francisco firm that suited me well, but with each year it seemed that the treadmill picked up pace, until I was sprinting, working 50- to 60-hour weeks, feeling as if I could never catch my breath. I was named a partner of the firm early. I was making more money than my parents. By all accounts I had succeeded. But I wasn't happy.

Finally, one morning as I readied for work, I had an epiphany. I thought of that seventh-grade kid who wanted to be a writer, who wanted to see his name on the cover of a book, and I realized

that dream was slipping away. Standing in my bedroom, my back to my wife, I uttered five words that would change my life. "I can't do this anymore," I said. My wife never hesitated and whispered back, "Then we won't."

It would take me almost a year before I would utter those words to my partners and colleagues. Some were genuinely happy for me, and some later told me that my courage had inspired them to also change their professional course.

But it had not been courage that led me to utter those words. It was fear. I was afraid of looking back on my life and realizing that I had never taken a chance at my dream. I was afraid of growing old and bitter and resentful, feeling professionally unfulfilled. I was

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afraid of never taking the bat off my shoulder and swinging for the fences because I was too afraid of striking out. And I did not want the fear of failure and rejection to dictate my life and how I chose to live it.

Perseverance

In July 1999, I left the practice of law and my home in the Bay area for Seattle. I rented a charming, brick-walled office—8 feet by 8 feet and windowless—that my wife affectionately called "the prison cell," and I set to work.

By my calculations, I would write a novel in a few months, and publication would be right around the corner. Yes, I was that naïve. So, following the mantra of writing what you know, I created a



character named David Sloane, a San Francisco lawyer who, though successful, felt unfulfilled. Sloane, however, had a remarkable ability to not only win trials but get a jury to do whatever he wanted. I called the book *A Wrongful Death*. I had no idea if it was any good, but I entered it in the Pacific Northwest Writers Association's literary contest and, lo and behold, it won.

Buoyed by my success, I sent queries out to five agents. Four rejected it, but the fifth called and wanted a six-week exclusive to read the manuscript. Of course, I agreed. After six weeks, Clyde called to tell me that the manuscript had promise but that the second half needed work. We set out to fix it.

Nearing Christmas, when it finally came time to send the manuscript to publishers, I had been gainfully unemployed for 18 months. In that time, my wife and I had a second child. I was nervous but hopeful. Then I didn't hear from Clyde for months. "Why don't you call him and find out what is happening?" my wife said. "No," I said, "I don't want to bother him." I was so happy to have an agent that I didn't want to screw it up. "He said he would call," I added.

Finally, in March, I received a 5-by-8-inch envelope from the agency. It looked suspiciously small for a contract. Inside I found a card with a picture of Clyde and the words "In Celebration." Needing no further prompting, I called his assistant. "Please tell me that Clyde is having a birthday," I said. "I'm sorry," she said, "Clyde died." "Oh, my God. Was it sudden?" I asked. "Yes, about three months ago. I'm sorry no one called. ... And no one here does the kind of 'boy books' you write. Good luck."

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Persistence

The first thing I did was reconfirm my goal. I said, "God, you gave me the talent to write. I know that. I've written

all my life. I've written my way through Stanford University and worked as a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*. No one has ever said, 'Son, you suck. Have you ever thought of accounting?'"

The next thing I did was evaluate my work. I realized that while I could write, what I didn't know was how to write a novel. So I dedicated myself to learning the craft. I immersed myself in the writing business. I joined a critique group. I began to attend writers conferences—not to win competitions but to learn from others. I pulled writers aside and asked them all kinds of questions, including what books on the craft they recommended. Then I bought the books and studied them until the pages were falling out of their spines.

I realized that I had been making all of the mistakes that agents and editors could spot in a moment. My query letter didn't explain the theme of my novel, and the synopsis was so long and convoluted that they never read it. The opening sentence of my first chapter didn't hook the reader, and the opening chapter wasn't compelling. I had flashbacks and biographies that slowed the first 50 pages to a crawl. I had too many characters. The plot drifted. I asked my wife to give me more time, and she agreed.

It is said that we make our own opportunities through hard work, and I believe that. But sometimes we also need a little luck. At a party I almost did not attend, I met an agent from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. He told me about an investigation that had gone to trial and had become a seminal case in the history of the EPA. That case would become the subject for our non-fiction exposé, *The Cyanide Canary*.

This time, however, when I sat to write, I was armed with all of my hard work. When I sent the book proposal to 10 literary agents, all of them wanted the book. When an agent with the Jane Rotrosen Agency called from her cell phone to tell me she was getting on a plane and asked me not to sign with

anyone before she landed, I knew that was the agency for me.

We sold the manuscript, and it appeared that I was on my way. But then the editor who bought and loved *Canary* soon thereafter left the publisher, as did my publicist. Enthusiasm at the house fell, and the book came out of the gate like a three-legged horse.

Undaunted, my agent and I turned our attention to my novel *A Wrongful Death*, as well as two others I had completed. She sent *A Wrongful Death* to an editor generally considered one of the best in the business, and again I allowed my expectations to be raised. When my agent called to inform me that the manuscript had been rejected, I couldn't hide my disappointment. The next day Jane Rotrosen called me, and she would give me the best advice of my career: "You have to be a bulldog in this business, kid. You got to be a bulldog."

I committed to being a bulldog. Shortly thereafter, two publishers bid on my first novel. Both were enthusiastic not only about it, but about my writing. I signed a two-book deal, and *A Wrongful Death* became *The Jury Master*. It made the *New York Times* bestseller list and stayed there for three weeks. *Damage Control* followed, and hardcover sales surpassed *The Jury Master*.

Even after that success, however, I have had to endure some anxious moments, but I don't panic anymore when they arise. I have confidence in myself

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and in my agent. When I signed with Touchstone, a division of Simon & Schuster, the publisher changed my third novel's working title to *Wrongful Death*. Fate? Perhaps. All I know for certain is that I never would have had the chance to see any of my books to publication had I never taken the bat off my

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shoulder, or quit when I first struck out.

My son Joe also never quit. He committed himself to becoming a better baseball player. He took hitting lessons. He went to catching clinics. He hit in the backyard until his hands hurt. When he turned 11, he was named the starting catcher on the Kirkland Little League All-Star team and led the team in hitting and runs batted in at the tournament that year. More important, he smiles a lot when he plays, even if he strikes out, and now he tells me he has a lot of fun. So do I.

We get through life with hard work, a little luck, and the kindness of others. During one particularly bleak moment in my career, a good friend, Michael Collopy, now one of the premier portrait photographers in the world, but once an executive at IBM, shared with me advice that his father gave to him when he expressed his desire to leave the corporate world to pursue his art. "If you follow your dreams, the money will come," he said. "Follow the money, and you'll lose your dreams."

You have the ability to follow your dreams, to overcome your fears of striking out and to cross that line between failure and success. You may have to cross it more than once. Like me, you may have to cross it many times. It won't be easy. You will strike out. When you do, remember: Be patient. Things don't always happen on your schedule. Be persistent. Those who succeed are almost always those who have first failed. Persevere. Those who give up have no chance of success.

You have to be a bulldog in this business, kid. You got to be a bulldog. Choose to be bulldogs.

Robert Dugoni

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