

Good evening and thanks for sticking around for this. Grab a glass of wine or bourbon, or both. Unfortunately, I'm on a forty day fast from alcohol. I'm much more charming and funny when I have a glass of wine or two. And I'm learning whatever this new normal is for meetings and conferences, I've only had a couple Zoom meetings. I'm still doing most of my business by phone and teleconferencing, which I love because I walk around outside and to be completely honest, I'm usually doing something else while I'm on these calls. I'm a writer who works at home with two teenagers, I'm quite adept at multitasking. You all know what I'm talking about. When you're a writer, you work in your head while you cook, clean, mow the yard, as we fall asleep, and as we get up in the morning. How many of you have been in the middle of some blowout with your spouse, and while voices are being raised, hands gesturing wildly, in the back of your head you're thinking, "I can use this"? You all know what I'm talking about. For me, residing in St. Louis and most everyone I deal with living in Los Angeles or New York, I'm used to having phone conferences. I don't think I've actual seen person for a face to face meeting in a couple years. I'm impressed with myself that I shaved for this and put on a shirt.

I am one of those writers who truly love the process of writing. And I've been blessed to make my living at it for 35 years now. Mostly as a screenwriter but also as a novelist and playwright. And I've reached a level where I'm actually marginally acceptable at the craft. Because honestly, what I actually know about writing you could put in a thimble and still have room to park a Cadillac. I have never considered myself a great writer. I do, however, fancy myself a hell of a storyteller. While I took writing courses in college, have been a part of many writers' groups throughout my life, the only thing I know about the craft of writing is that I still have an enormous amount to learn. Pretty much everything I know about writing I learned by writing.

And writing.

And writing.

There's a famous Confucius saying that if you love your job, you'll never work a day in your life, I'm here to tell you straight up, Confucius was full of crap. I love to write, I love my job of writing. But it's work. I believe anyone on this phone conference will tell you that what we do is work and it's not for the faint of heart.

We work hard to get the writing to feel right, to conjure up the correct words to convey that feeling, we struggle with the structure the stories, to create characters that are unique and have their own voices. And most importantly, we struggle to connect to our readers, to make them feel what we are feeling - the emotions we feel when we write. And that's the part I love. But it can be epically complicated and frustrating. We can hate every word we type for days and we end up rewriting for more days, and revising and fixing until we can tolerate what we've created on the page.

It's work. Even when we love it and it's flowing and you're in the groove, it's work.

And the creation is the easy part. After we finally have something we love – or at least can live with - we have to hand our work off, to agents, managers, publishers, editors, executives, producers, whomever...we have to get them to read it and then either sell it, make it or publish it. Working a lot in the film and TV business – they don't call it 'show business' for nothing - there's no show without the business. For most creative people the business of writing is excruciating, infuriating and extremely intimidating. Contracts, rewriting to other people's notes, often people who know far less than you about the story you are telling, who are tossing in their two-cents on your work like literary hand grenades, which only lead to two things, more writing on your project and less confidence in it. This is the madness we put up with to get our work out to the public. I could go on about this, but this is supposed to be inspiring you to create, not drink.

Not that I believe the two are mutually exclusive.

But even with all that said, all that stands against us, we persist. In spite of the financial hardships of creating, and I don't care who you are or how successful you are, we've all had financial hardships because of our writing and yet, we put our heads down, our fingers on the keyboard and we write. Creative people are the most driven people I know, because we create even when nothing is promised. We are driven to bring to life worlds that only exist in the mind, worlds from the past, worlds from the future, worlds from today, inner-worlds filled with emotion and secrets, worlds that stir a readers or viewers imagination. Love, hate, betrayal, sadness, joy, enduring friendships, lifelong hardships. We bring these, and more, to life in words so that someone else can feel them, experience them, imagine them, feel inspired, feel grateful, and maybe feel a little deeper than before they picked up our work.

Why am I telling you all of this?

Because what we create has value. And if I'm burying the lead – this is it. Our work is valuable. Not some of it, not certain people's, ALL of our work has value. Now before you mumble under your breath, "Yeah, easy to say..." and start playing that game where you shoot fruit on your phone, hear me out. And for those of you who believe what I'm saying, hang with me in solidarity. What we create is a product. Be it a book, a script, a play, an essay, poetry, songs, they are products, products that have value. In our business, while often feeling like the Wild, Wild West when it comes to making money, with some people striking gold, some not, and the rest of us somewhere in between, everything we write can be monetized. Our work is worth it, we are worth it.

I learned a long time ago that there will always be people making more money than me, and a lot making less. And a lot of those making less are far more talented writers than me. I chose not to look around. And that has really helped me survive the business of writing. But what I am saying to everyone, is to set your own place at the table. Make sure you get fed. It most likely won't rain money. But sometimes it does. Learn how to sell your stuff. Or hook up

with someone who has that expertise (and it is expertise). I believe all writers to be paid for that they do. I often find that creative people don't understand their worth.

We do something most people cannot. We must get paid for it.

Focus on your work, set your price, and deliver the goods. Stop looking over the fence at your neighbor, because it makes you either complacent or angry. It's hard to enough to accomplish anything as a writer without either of those emotions haunting you.

And for the younger writers in this group, remember that writing careers are usually heading in one of two directions. You are either skyrocketing towards a peak or dropping into a valley. Having worked a long time in film business, I don't know anyone whose career trajectory has continually aimed skyward. There will be moments when you are sailing upwards, you see nothing but blue sky and you think you're going to be soaring forever. Then suddenly, and often drastically, a flock of gulls clogs your engine with rejection and doubt, and you're now plummeting towards the bottom of a gorge, and falling fast. Personally, writing has brought me tremendous highs and just as many lows. Some last a short time, some last longer.

Here's the trick: trust neither of the highs or the lows.

Accept that this is a business that fluxuates, financially, creatively, emotionally. The only thing guaranteed is change. And when you're soaring, things are good, your book is selling, you sell a script or hired to write one, some company has asked you to come aboard and handle some creative work for them, and you're making money, put it in the bank. Because the only thing you're guaranteed is that these successes are often fleeting and precarious.

When you are making it, put your money in the bank.

My mother, God rest her soul, was the stingiest person to ever grace this planet. And it's because of her, not because of any insight of my own, that I learned to stash away the cash when I was making it, never live above my means, and put my trust in myself came to being successful, which was as simple as ABC: Always Be Creating.

This has served me well financially in a business where nothing is a given except whatever your fortunes are, they will change. And anyone for whom writing is a career will tell you that the enemy of creative is fear. Nothing scares most people more than lack of money. So, revel in the moments when things are going well, capitalize on those moments when it is happening, BUT think like a businessperson – because writing is a business.

And conversely, when things in your writing career are dismal, nothing you're writing is garnering the attention you want, KEEP CREATING and trust that the down times won't last forever either. While I would never say in any sort of creative endeavor such as writing that we control much, we do control the content we create and the amount of content we create.

Keep writing.

Because that is the only way to change fortunes in the writing business, to keep writing. Keep building your audience, your readership, the producers, agents, publishers and editors who like your work (or like you.) No easy task, but you have to become the writer that publishers say yes to. That producers want to work with. That companies want to hire.

Now you're thinking, 'just how do I do that?' Well, there's thousands different answers to that. One for every successful writer and no two are the same. You forge your own road. Again, never easy. But everyone's journey through the business of writing is different.

Writing is not just about creating material that people read or see or listen to, there's another aspect that is equally important. Uncovering yourself.

We are in one of the few businesses where everything we create possesses a piece of our soul. Your spirit goes into this work, I don't think any creative person will tell you differently. And personally, it makes the process of writing more satisfying when I bare myself in the work, when I stretch to reach for something true and emotional. And the more of myself I put into a project, I have found the more my readers respond. Those are the projects people remember you for, and for me, the ones that have been the most financially lucrative. But they are the ones that causes more trepidation when you put them out in the world.

No one said it would be easy.

The fact that we can always create something new means we have the power to open a new revenue stream. Each new book, each new script, each new essay, every project is a chance for us to earn money. And I hope I'm making very clear that I am big proponent of writers making money, and am grateful that writing has been my career for 35 years.

As a screenwriter, people have commented snidely more than once that I'm overpaid for how I earn my living. Even one of my sons, when he was pissed off at me, said, "You don't write, all you do is *type!*" Yeah, that one hurt a little bit, and I quickly reminded him that my 'typing' put a roof over his head and food in his belly. And even though I'm sure there's a few producers and readers who might agree with my son, I've always said, that they don't pay me to write. I would do that for free. What they pay me for – what they pay all of us for – is the aggravation: the doors slammed in our faces, the stupid notes, the projects that amount to nothing, the promises made that never came to be, the times we are screwed on a deal.

And for all of that, they do not pay any of us enough.

Regardless, this is what I love, and because I love it, I do it as often as I can. When I'm not working on assignment, I am at my desk working on a new novel, a new spec script, or a new play. And after decades of writing, it's like breathing for me. Other than my family, I would give up most things as long as I could still write. Writing is part of my DNA now. I crave the time that I get to write, and will often turn down doing other things so I can use the time to write. Various writers are quoted as saying they don't like to write but like having written, but I'm one that actually loves to sit down and see the words align on the page, I love finding a

clever way to turn a phrase, I get enjoyment cracking difficult scenes that aren't working on the page. There's something zen for me about writing, about leaving the world I exist in for the world of my characters. Even if my characters are going through something dark, and I love when characters slog through whatever horrible life I've trapped them in, I find it very cathartic. For me, if my writing doesn't make me cry, I don't believe my readers will cry. If it doesn't make me laugh, I don't believe my readers will laugh. I work really hard to create characters whose emotions are felt and will grab my readers.

When people ask me what I would do if I wasn't writing, I have no answer. This is it.

And because of that I am blessed. My goal is I get older is to spread that blessing, to inspire other people, especially younger people, to write, to create, and to show them that you can make a living at it. Because to make a living at something you love, while work, is a gift. When I was a small kid, my dad dug ditches for a living. I remember that. I remember him coming home bone tired and dirty. For me to make a living as a writer...even with all the nonsense writers put up with, and it's a lot, I'm grateful.

I am just some working-class guy from St. Louis, who when I was 14 was sitting in the movie theater with my middle school friends when a rogue wave turned over the S.S. Poseidon. My eyes widened as I watched that set turn upside down, all those actors sliding around, stunt men and women being thrown around, and I ate it up! I remember saying to myself once the boat turned completely over, "I want to do that." From then on, writing stories I thought were cool, that moved me, that excited me, was what I wanted to do. I wanted to write for the movies!

I chalk up any success I've had to a few things. The first being in the right place at the right time...caveat being, with the right story. From the tales told of how people - who aren't connected to the film or literary worlds - broke in, there's always some sort of luck, and by that I mean something unexplainable that occurs in every creatively successful career. That moment you've been waiting for appears. You get your shot. But - and this is a big but - there's no way luck can occur if you don't put yourself out there. There's no way luck can occur if you don't put your work out there.

I have a good friend, a successful chic-lit novelist who got her break by approaching an agent at a party. Admittedly, she'd been drinking or as she told me, she would have never walked up to the agent. But she told the agent she could write a better book than the writers she represented. The agent told her to prove it. My friend said she went home and wrote a story she had in her head for a while and a couple sample chapters. Long story short, the agent responded to what she wrote and my friend ended up with a book deal at St. Martins.

Be brave. You put yourself out there. You put your material out there. Over and over. And as we all know, you will get a lot of no's. So many no's you'll begin to think it's your middle name.

But all it takes is one yes.

As I reminisce about my own career and know that two other things made me successful. The first is when I stopped chasing trends and wrote from my heart, penning stories that I wanted to tell. Because those stories, those scripts, those books, were far superior to the other things I was writing, trying to chase a whatever the business seemed to want at that moment. If you're chasing a trend that isn't you, trust me when I say, there are writers who love that sort of material and write it all the time. They are going to do that sort of material better than you. You can only be the best you as a writer. So discover who that is, and the material that you love and write the hell out of that.

And the other thing that helped me find success was that I was good at putting material in people's hands. And I know that sometimes that's easier said than done. If you're looking for an agent, or manager or publisher or producer, or whoever can open a door from you, they are hard to get to. It's designed that way. And yes, it's tough. But those chances come, and you have to be ready, you have to have your best, you have to value yourself. Don't be afraid to put your material out there and suffer the slings and arrows that will certainly come your way. Remember, it only takes one yes.

Another good friend called me one day and said she was thinking of writing a series of novels. Now if you've been around a while as a writer you have heard two things endlessly. One is "Hey, I have this great idea for a story..." and the person will either want you to write their story or worse, write it with them. And the other is, "I was thinking of writing a book (or script, or essay, or whatever...)" to which you fight every instinct you have that makes you want to throttle the person speaking. Because you know how hard it is, and if they really wanted to do it, they would do it.

But my friend said she was going to use this character in her head for a series of mysteries. I didn't hear from her for about four or five months. And then she called me and said, "I finished the first two books." Now this author had no sophistication in terms of the writing business, of agents or publishers, and as I've gotten to know her, absolutely no patience for bullshit. But what she did have now was two terrific novels which was the start of a series, a bit of social media expertise and an artist who had designed some terrific, evocative cover art for her books. She put out the first book and used her social media skills to hype the book to a very specific audience. And it worked. She got readers. And her "business plan" was to release the next book three months later, while she was penning book number three. Her readership grew exponentially with the second book. But then what she did was sort of genius. She decided to write short stories using the same characters and publish them as well, with all the proceeds going to charity. Because of the short stories, her readership exploded. People felt good buying the short stories because the proceeds were going to charity, and those that didn't know her from her books, went back and bought the first two books. She has continued with the process of releasing short stories or novellas using the character from her books and giving the money to charity.

I love this story because she's been able to give thousands of dollars to charities. Which in and of itself is wonderful. But also as a marketing tool, she was able to use those short stories to build a much larger readership for her books. She's now on her fifth novel, outlining six and seven, and continuing her to put out the short stories which benefit the charities she's selected. How cool is that? I'm not going to tell anyone she's getting super-rich, but she's making a very good living, and thousands of dollars are going to various organizations that do some good for the world. That's a win-win.

I'm in awe of these people, and if I lack any skills it's using social media and drawing attention to my books and work. I've been lucky (right place, right time, right material) a few times where I didn't have to, and as a screenwriter, I have enough fans at the producer, studio and network level to make a living. But part of the value I talked about earlier, is making these connections and using the tools that we all have – social media, etc. – to exploit your work for profit. I love when friends are successful. Another thing I believe to be true about writing is that there's little competition. If a company buys my project, that doesn't mean they won't buy yours. I can only write what Bart Baker can write. They aren't hiring me to write an Aaron Sorkin script, a David Mamet play, or a John Grisham book. Why would I try and copy them? They already exist. If someone wants something like they write, they will hire or buy from them. I can only write like me and I focusing on being the best Bart Baker as a writer that I can be.

No one else can be you. So be the greatest you as a writer you can.

Beyond my drive as a writer, and I don't recommend this for everyone, I gave myself no Plan B. There was no question that I was going to be a writer. When I left St. Louis at 21 and took off for California, having never been west of Kansas City, there was simply no other plan. I wanted to write and act, and after landing a few small roles as an actor and a stint on a soap opera for a few months, I knew that wasn't for me. But the entire time, I was writing. The entire time I had to work a 'day job', I was writing. And when I got my break, which came in the form of playwriting, when I had two plays picked up and were staged almost back to back in Los Angeles (with some TV stars involved so they got some press,) people came and saw my work. My first play, RELAY, was sold out almost every night and people came from the studios to check it out. The movie rights were bought by Warner Bros. Agents also came and one I particularly liked asked if I had anything else written.

I was prepared for my luck to happen. I had a half dozen screenplays written.

Within six months, she sold two of them. LIVE WIRE, an action movie that New Line Cinema bought, and a family dramady that CBS bought - a script that by the way, got some of the worst coverage you could ever imagine. It was devastating and mean. And if I didn't trust my work, it would have curled me into a ball on my bed and I would never have written another word. But I knew this reader was wrong. How...I couldn't tell you. I simple trusted myself more. I keep that coverage pinned to a bulletin board next to my desk, because that project,

CHILDREN OF THE BRIDE, got made, did well (back in the day when there were only three or four networks, we would get a viewership of 22 million people. Now a days if you got that many people to tune into anything, they would carry you around Los Angeles in a chair so your feet would never have to touch the ground). CHILDREN was so successful for the network, it spawned a sequel, BABY OF THE BRIDE. BABY did even better and the network commissioned a third, MOTHER OF THE BRIDE.

A trilogy of TV movies from one script, and my career was off and running.

Arrogant as it sounds in my head as I write this, I never doubted that I would break in. Because I had something else that I relied on - my utter ignorance about how hard it really was. Simply put, I knew so little about how this business worked, I didn't know I COULDN'T do it. My thought always was, 'hell, other people have done it, and some of them have to be dumber and less talented than me.' I couldn't see any reason why I shouldn't have this career.

Obviously, I knew it was a hard business to crack, and I'd had plenty of door shut in my face, plenty of disappointment by the time my breaks came. But I didn't care. The difficulties, the no's, the doors shut in my face, did nothing but piss me off and spur me on. I had an uncle say to me right before I left for California, "You're not going to make it. You'll be back in six months." I knew then that was never going to happen, if for no other reason than that pissed me off.

I never let someone else chase me away from my dreams.

My career has been loaded with a lot of blessings, meeting the most interesting people, most wonderful, some heinous – on a movie I had made - the movie that spurred me to write my first novel, HONEYMOON WITH HARRY - I was treated extraordinarily badly by people that knew less about making movies, and certainly writing them, than I did. They were so untrustworthy that when I turned in the last draft of the script, I drove to their office, made them put the check on the table as I put the script on the table and we slid them across the table to each other, like it was some sort of mob exchange. They screwed me out of my bonus, didn't invite me to the premiere, tried unsuccessfully to get my name off the movie which after seeing it, I would have considered because they made an awful movie, trashing the screenplay.

But karma always has the last say, and not long after the movie came out the producer went to federal prison for bilking investors out of their money and tax evasion.

There are a lot of crappy people in Hollywood. Thankfully, there are more wonderful people who have been a joy to work with and get to know. And all the crappy people and hard times...they make for great stories.

I will keep writing. I find that aging gives me a different, very cool perspective on life. I have young teenage sons, I feel I can grasp a lot things that I wouldn't without those boys in my life. Getting older gives me a sense of 'hurry up', because there's still so much I want to accomplish, stories I want to write, screenplays I have in my head and my heart. And writing

still gives me a sense of calm, of escape. And because I've had movie and TV produced, I've had novels published and plays put on stages around the world, I don't feel I'm trying to prove something to myself – or others – anymore. I just want to keep writing because I love it. And working in the movie and book business, I've had so many amazing experiences, things that young kid who watched the S.S. Poseidon turn over could never have imagined. I'm grateful for each and every one, all the joys and even the sorrows – because as most writers know, the sorrows often are the lifeblood of what we do.

Now I consider each experience, past and present, a new chapter. Each person I meet, a possible new character for a story. Everything I feel, the successes and especially the failures, offer me understanding, giving me a new facet to my writing. Maybe I'm a complete idiot, and admittedly, that's gotten me through a few fiascos in my life, I feel my best is yet to come. I'm not done living and therefore I'm not done writing. I don't feel like I know much more about writing than I did when I was younger, but I am demonstrably more secure in my work. I am more open to diversity of humanity and that gives me a greater love for the characters I create. Get older, I am a better student of life. I listen better. Whatever fleetness that has been lost has been made up in patience and humor. Yes, as sad as the world is, I find it a lot funnier than I used to.

I guess that tells you more about how serious I used to be than the humorous events littering the landscape of the world presently.

One day I might actually feel I know what the hell I'm doing as a writer instead of this gnawing feeling that I'm still winging it. And if I don't, that okay with me too. If people don't find out I'm the fraud I often feel I am, good. Either way, I'm not going to stop me from writing. Writing sustains me emotionally, it gives me purpose and it's put a roof over my head. Maybe I am blessed, maybe I'm lucky, I don't question it as much as I used to. But I know I'm grateful.

Even through this pandemic, which has been difficult at best, I have hidden my mania, my loneliness, my anger in my writing. It has given me an outlet for dealing with what I'm feeling and more than that, a place to hide, and feel normal amid the craziness and the unknown. I am thankful to have that place to bury myself from the world and create worlds where I have control, in a time when the world is out of control. Through these last few months, I've been working on a few projects for The Hallmark Channel, one set in a small fishing town on the east coast. And losing myself in the near-perfect world I've created for this script and the lovely characters that inhabit it, has been quite a needed reprieve from what's going on in the world. Hallmark might not solve the problems of the world, but they are a great escape, and there's a lot that can be said for that right now.

For me, and I imagine for most of us, writing saves our sanity. It's where we all go to have some control, to release our emotions, and find out about ourselves. The day we stop writing is the day we all stop looking inward. I'm not ready for that day. I hope you aren't either. Through the history we are living through today, other people need our stories more

than ever! They need to bury themselves somewhere else. They need to laugh, they need to cry, they need to think, they need to feel, they need to escape. And that's what we do better than anybody! Offering our readers and viewers an escape might be the greatest gift we can give them right now. That's on our shoulders. It's what we can offer the world right now and for years and years to come.

So, the conclusion is quite simple. Write. And keep writing.

Love what you do, let it show in the work.

Be brave. Don't be afraid to share your passion in your stories. That's what moves your readers.

Find the value in your work, your talent has worth.

Storytellers have been around since the beginning of time for one reason, we are necessary and people want what we create.

Thank you.