

*Four*

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Crafting II:  
Moving and Shaking

## Winning Through Timidation, or First Aid for Fear

Up to this point, everything you've done—with the possible exception of throwing a barn-raising party—has been on paper. If you haven't been too nervous, it's because you haven't had to do anything dangerous yet.

The structure you've built on your planning wall has led you right up to the threshold of action, and it has taken away a lot of your old excuses for not acting—like not knowing where to start, or despairing of ever getting there (your flow chart shows you exactly how you are going to get there), or thinking you'll get around to it someday. So having a structure makes it a lot likelier that you will act. But it can't make you act at the moment when you encounter what Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan called “the first enemy”—*fear*.

Fear strikes when you feel as if you'd been so busy building and climbing a ladder that you forgot there was a thirty-foot diving board at the top. All of a sudden you're teetering out at the end of that board, with your toes curling over the edge, and the loudspeaker is booming, “Hello! Are you ready?” And as the spotlight hits you and the drums begin to roll, you feel like yelling, “Wait a minute! I thought we were just having fun! I didn't know I was actually going to have to *jump!*”

That may not happen to you the first day you start work on your goal, because many first steps are as small and simple as just walking down the steps into the shallow end of the pool. There's nothing particularly intimidating about a trip to the library or the newsstand. But you keep taking those little steps, and one day very soon you're going to find yourself out on the end of your first thirty-foot board. It may be a job interview, or a dramatic audition, or the first day of a class, or the day you finish your nice safe research and have to start writing. But whatever it is, it will have an element of the *unknown* (you've never done this before); a strong *investment* (both your dreams and your self-image are at stake); and a corresponding *risk* (you may get hurt, mess up, make a fool of yourself, find out you're not good enough).

The funny thing is, you may or may not know it when you encounter the first enemy. The physical symptoms of fear are unmistakable: icy hands, wobbly knees, blushing, stammering, a runaway heart, and a seasick stomach. The body has a candor that's refreshing, if sometimes embarrassing. But the mind is much sneakier. It thinks fear is beneath its dignity, so it will try to save face by persuading you that you're not scared at all—you just suddenly remembered you had pressing business elsewhere. Since it's important to know when you are dealing with fear, I'm going to show you some of its most common disguises, so that you'll be able to unmask it in a flash.

### KNOW YOUR ENEMY

If you've ever had any of the following thoughts, feelings, or experiences in the course of trying to do or get what you want, you have met fear. Put a check mark beside the ones that are familiar to you, because you're going to be meeting them again very soon.

- An overwhelming desire to sleep: you're suddenly so tired
- An overwhelming desire to eat: you're suddenly famished
- An overwhelming attraction to the paperback rack: you must read *Love's Tender Fury* or the latest Travis McGee mystery *now*
- The soothing thought, "I've got plenty of time. It can wait till tomorrow."
- A suddenly blank mind: you were fermenting with plans and ideas, now you're the Village Idiot

- A sudden ferment of plans and ideas about eighteen other dreams you'd rather have first, before this one ("Gee, I've never been to Europe . . . I can always start my business when I get back.")
- A sudden loss of interest in your goal: it fascinated you in theory, but in reality it's boring, not for you at all (NOTE: Hidden fear will try to trick you into changing your goal whenever it starts getting challenging. That's why so many of us have picked up and dropped so many activities—not because we're "dilettantes" who can't make up our minds.)
- A sudden conviction that you don't have what it takes for this goal ("Whatever made me think I was aggressive enough for a job in sales? I'm really a very shy, retiring person.")

When fear strikes—whether it's bare-faced or in one of these disguises—what's to stop you from saying, "I've changed my mind. I'm not ready yet"? What's to stop you from tearing up all your charts, stuffing them in the wastebasket, kicking this book into a corner, and deciding that goals are just a bad ego trip and you'd rather join a Zen monastery or get pregnant instead?

I'll tell you what's to stop you from letting fear stop you. *Everything in this section.* Because I happen to believe that missing out on your dreams and never finding out what you're capable of is a hell of a high price to pay for peace. You have the right to get what you want and become all you can be—and sometimes that means you have a right to *act* even when every nerve in your body is screaming "Stop!!" The secret is to turn the "first enemy" into a stimulating companion, advisor, and friend.

*Fear is the natural companion of creative action.* There is only one way to live free of fear—and that is to live without hope, change, or growth. Do you want to know what "self-confidence" really is? Just think about how you feel when you're doing something you've done so many times you could do it in your sleep—like tying your shoes. That is self-confidence, and that's all it is: know-how verging on boredom. Do you remember the first time you tied your own shoes? You weren't self-confident then. You were nervous, excited, and unsure. But you mastered shoe-tying, and you soon moved on to bigger things in which, once again, you had no self confidence—like arithmetic . . . and jitter-bugging . . . and driving a car. That's the game we're playing. That's the law of human growth. Would you like to do nothing but tie your shoe again for the rest of your life so you'd never have to feel nervous again?

There's no way around it. When you start moving, you start shaking. Every time you try anything new, anything that really summons and stretches your capacities—in short, anything worth doing—you're going to feel uncertainty and self-doubt as well as challenge and exhilaration. That is the healthy fear called *stage fright*, and I'm going to let you in on what all accomplished people know: how to live with it and love it. It's a good friend that lets you know you're on the right track, that what you're doing is big enough for you. There are easy ways. To make yourself move right through it, and as soon as you do, it turns into pure excitement.

For many of us, however, stage fright is complicated by another kind of fear, much deeper and more disabling, I call it *survival fear*.

Survival fear is most common in “first-generation winners”—people whose families didn't know how to prepare them for action. The people it doesn't afflict are the rare ones who've had lots of loving support who've been shown *how* to do things, so they could start getting experience early. To those lucky people, the unknown is just . . . the unknown. There could be a lady or a tiger behind that door, but they're prepared for either one. They've handled both before. They know they can call on reinforcements in an emergency. They aren't going to open that door without nervous palpitations, but you can bet they're going to open it. They have had the security human beings need for risk and adventure.

For those of us who haven't had emotional and practical backing, however, the unknown is the part of the map with the dragons in it. When we don't know what's coming, we expect the worst. If you feel a mistake or a failure would be so devastating that you don't even dare try, that's survival fear. So is the paralysis that strikes when you demand a performance of yourself that's far beyond your skill and experience—like trying to write the Great American Novel the first time you sit down to write. If you think someone you love will be hurt or hate you or divorce you if you start getting what you want, that's survival fear, too.

*All survival fear is exaggerated.* It gets its intensity from a child's-eye view of the world that many of us were never helped to outgrow. Of course one mistake isn't going to be the end of you. Every great novelist, salesman, doctor, or anything else began as an inexperienced beginner. And it's an extremely rare husband who's really going to divorce his wife for painting

instead of ironing his shirts. Your *mind* knows that. Your *feelings* don't. The best antidote for those feelings is the adult experience of going ahead and doing the thing and finding out that nothing so terrible happens after—but *it's precisely that experience that the fear prevents us from getting*. So we're caught in a vicious cycle, a lot like the old circular saw about a job: "Can't get self-confidence without experience; can't get experience without self-confidence."

How can you tell stage fright from survival fear? With just a little encouragement and Hard Times, you can push right through stage fright. Survival fear is too strong. You can't bluff and brave your way through it—and for a very good reason. As exaggerated as it is, that fear has a real message for you. It's trying to tell you that there's something you need and have got to get before you can afford to take risks and have adventures. It may be practical preparation or emotional support; it may be permission to lower perfectionist standards or to make mistakes. The message will be different for different people. But whatever it is you need, if you don't get it and you try to go ahead without it, you really will get hurt. And your body knows it.

So the only way to break the vicious cycle of survival fear is to *respect the fear and pay attention to it*. If you decode the *survival message* and take care of your need, all that's going to be left of your fear is stage fright—and that's the easy part.

### SURVIVAL MESSAGE NO. 1: PREPARE

Suppose you have something to do that you've never done before—say something that involves presenting or selling yourself, like going for a job interview, asking for a raise, or taking samples of your handmade greeting cards around to gift shops. You're scared. Being scared just makes you feel more inadequate, more sure that you're going to lose the power of speech and trip over your own feet. So what you usually do is try to fight the fear, either steeling yourself with will power or relaxing yourself by deep breathing. That doesn't work very well, and the reason it doesn't is because it misses the most important point: you have never done this thing before, and *you don't know how*.

In this situation, self-doubt is not a weakness—it's a valuable warning signal. It's telling you you're about to go off the thirty-foot board without

ever having had a diving lesson in your life, and that's dumb! The worst thing about Positive Thinking is that it tries to override this natural signal and push you into the arena full of blind, unfounded confidence. That can get you so badly hurt that you'll never try again. *A positive attitude is a rotten substitute for knowing what you're doing.* If I told you, "You're wonderful, you can do it!" and sent you into the ring against Muhammad Ali, I'd be guilty of murder. The least I could do for your self-doubt in that case would be boxing lessons.

The survival message here is an urgent request for *preparation, imagination, instruction,* and rehearsal. You aren't supposed to be born knowing everything—although some men and most women think they are. If you don't know something, say, "I'd better find out." Don't say, "There's something wrong with me, and if I ask, everybody will know."

### *Information and Instruction*

This is where you can really *use your network.* If you have a difficult phone call, interview, or sales pitch coming up, find someone who's done that kind of thing and ask: "What should I say? How do I act? What should I wear?" Get a close approximation of the actual words you're going to say. *Write them down.* If you like, you can use them as a little script for rehearsal, or as cue cards for a phone call.

Another thing you need to know is the questions that are likely to be asked of you, so you can be ready with the answers. If the owner of a gift shop likes your greeting cards and then asks you, "Advance or consignment? And what's the retail discount?" you don't want to stand there opening and closing your mouth; it doesn't look professional, and it feels awful. Again, someone who's had experience is the source to go to. If you're scheduled for a job interview in a particular company, it will help you to know as much as you can about that company in advance: what its priorities and objectives are, what kind of ability and personality they're looking for, even what kinds of questions they ask in their job interviews! Read about the company. Talk with somebody who works there. You'll get a better sense of what you have to offer in the context of that company, and you'll impress the interviewer with your initiative and interest.

## *Rehearsal*

It may seem silly to you to actually practice a phone call or interview, but it's one of the most reassuring things you can do if you're nervous. Knowledge hastily filed in your head is more likely to desert you under the pressure of stage fright than knowledge you've programmed into your behavior so it's at least semiautomatic. Actors know that. They don't just memorize their lines and then walk on stage opening night. They rehearse.

It helps a lot to have someone to rehearse to, who plays the other part, throws you your cues, and helps you shape up your performance. It's good practice to stand up in front of someone and talk, whether it's your mate, your child, or a friend. (The next chapter will tell you how to enlist that kind of help.) But there are also two very useful kinds of rehearsing you can do by yourself, in fantasy.

## *SuperMe/SuperFool*

Know how you sometimes lie awake in the safety of your bed imagining the perfect conversation or argument, in which you are devastatingly witty, utterly poised, and say all the right things? And how, on the other hand, when you're in the throes of stage fright, you imagine utter catastrophe? Both kinds of fantasy have a purpose. They are instinctive efforts to *prepare*. Here's how you can help them help you.

Whatever it is you've got coming up, sit back in a comfortable chair, close your eyes, relax, and imagine how you'd do it if you were perfect. A flawless performance by the person you wish you were, the person you've only seen in movies and daydreams . . . who doesn't exist.

Now change the scene. Shut your eyes, tense up, and imagine the worst disaster that could possibly befall you. You walk into the office smiling with your hand stuck out, trip over the rug, and fall on your face. You stutter. The magazine editor, leafing through your short story about the death of your dog, starts to laugh. You forget your own name. Whatever. Just make it a real pratfall—the worst.

Now open your eyes.



This exercise will bring you the great relief of realizing that *you're not either one*. SuperMe doesn't exist, it's true but SuperFool doesn't either. Since you can't possibly be perfect (and no one else is either), why torture yourself trying to be, or punish yourself for failing to be? On the other hand, no matter how badly you mess up, you'll never live down to your SuperFool fantasies. So you can stop worrying on that score. You've now explored the most extreme possibilities, and you can be sure that the reality is going to fall somewhere in between. But you can get a few helpful hints from your SuperMe fantasy. That paragon may have come up with some genuinely elegant ideas, gestures, or lines. It was your imagination that scripted them—it won't be plagiarism if you use them!

### *Role-Play the Opposition*

It will help you to be prepared for an interview or encounter if you sit in a chair and imagine that you are the person you're going to meet, watching *you* come into the room. You've had practice at this way back in Chapter 3—"Seeing Yourself as Others See You." That time, you wrote down everything nice that the person you were role-playing would see in you. This time, however, you are role-playing a prospective employer, backer, retailer, or customer—someone who has wants, needs, and expectations you will have to meet if the encounter is to be a success. Useful questions to ask yourself are: "What is this person looking for in the way of an employee/investment opportunity/retail item? Would s/he be more impressed by a conservative, casual, or strikingly original appearance? What kinds of questions is s/he likely to ask? How do I look to this person? Is there a mismatch between his or her expectations and the way I present myself? If so, what is it and how can I fix it?"

I disagree with people who think it's possible to be "overprepared". I really don't think there is such a thing. Just as long as you don't forget that the real situation will be different from your practice sessions, that it remains fundamentally unpredictable, preparation can do you nothing but good. There are going to be enough unknowns in the actual encounter without adding unnecessary ones! Preparation doesn't cure stage fright, but it does make you feel a lot more secure than if you were walking into a strange situation cold. And once you've had some experience, you won't need as much preparation, because your experience will be your preparation.

## SURVIVAL MESSAGE NO. 2: LOWER YOUR STANDARDS— AT FIRST

This is the merciful message fear is trying to get across to you whenever you freeze with your paintbrush in midair . . . or your fingers an inch above the typewriter keys . . . or your mouth open to make your first insurance sales pitch. No matter how prepared you are for your first day on a new job, or the first real page of a novel you've been making notes on for months, this is different. This is *real*. You've never done it before, and if you expect yourself to do it the first time with the finesse of someone doing it for the thousandth time, you'll be in trouble. You won't be able to do it at all.

There are many reasons for becoming this kind of premature perfectionist. You may have had overly high standards imposed on you as a kid. Or, like me, you may have been told that you were a wonderful genius who could do anything in the world, but never told *how*. Or maybe you grew up in what I call an “audience family”: people who regard great achievements as the effortless products of a superior species, and can't see the long, slow, human process of development that leads up to them. Any of these early experiences can create a humiliating gap between your fantasy of what you *could* do and the reality of what you *can* do.

Your vision of what you could do isn't necessarily wrong. The problem is that your vision and ambition have outgrown your experience and skill. To give them a chance to catch up, you have to allow yourself to do what you never got a chance to do as a child: *start at the beginning*. I know it feels funny to be an adult beginner in our precocious society, but there are wonderful rewards. The world is kind to beginners the way it's kind to preschool children. They get lots of help and praise and they're allowed to play.

### *Professional First Steps: 'Fess Up, Don't Mess Up*

Bernadette, 46, had passed her real-estate certification course with flying colors, but it was her first day as an agent and she was facing her first customer. The man had asked a routine question about mortgage rates, and Bernadette knew she was supposed to have the answer at her fingertips. But her mind had gone blank. The seconds ticked past as she waited for the man to realize that she wasn't a competent professional at all, just an impostor

pretending to be one. Then she'd lose the sale. But finally she had to say something, so she admitted, "This is my first day on the job. I'm sorry, I'll have to look that up."

The customer said, "Oh, are you just starting out in this business? Great! I'll have to bring my wife over to meet you. Now that our kids are growing up, she's wondering whether it's too late to get some kind of professional training."

You know from your own experience that if a tour guide, taxi driver, or librarian fumbles around, take too long, and makes mistakes, you get annoyed—unless he or she tells you, "It's my first day. I'm new at this." Then you immediately become sympathetic and curious! If it's the other way around and you're the one in the hot seat, the worst thing you can do is try to act experienced and suave. The strain of keeping up the act will make you twice as clumsy and prone to mistakes. Admitting you're a beginner, on the other hand, instantly creates a warm, relaxed, low-risk atmosphere in which—paradoxically—your performance improves. Even medical students new on the wards, who are terrified of hurting someone with a misplaced needle, are often soothed and reassured by the patients themselves! You won't be a beginner for long. More will be expected of you even a week or a month from now. But by that time you'll be ready for it.

### *Creative First Steps: Start Badly*

When you're starting a first creative project or beginning the study of an art or craft, what I want you to do is lower your standards until they disappear. That's right. You're not supposed to be any good at the beginning. So you might as well give yourself the liberating gift of joyously expecting yourself to be *bad*.

Forty-three-year-old Matthew wanted to take up drawing and painting again after a twenty-year lapse, but he found all kinds of excuses not to start. The biggest thing stopping his hand was the fear that he wouldn't be any good. So I told him that his first step was to go home and do a bad drawing of the cat, the coffeepot—anything, just as long as it was *bad*. He had to do at last one terrible drawing every night for a week. The point was simply to get his hand moving—by getting rid of the paralyzing expectation that he demonstrate a skill he couldn't possibly have. And it worked. He looked through

his first sheaf of “bad” drawings with surprised pleasure. Of course they weren’t that bad at all.

Elaine, a 30-year-old English teacher, did not want to be an English teacher all her life. She had a secret fantasy of becoming a best-selling mystery writer, which she was embarrassed to confess because she had never been able to get past page 1 of a thriller. The solution for Elaine was to set herself the unthreatening task of writing just ten bad pages a week, working early in the mornings before school. She is now 150 pages into her first book, and she’s having so much fun working out the intricacies of the plot that she’s forgotten to worry about whether it’s good or not. When it’s finished, maybe she’ll revise it and get it published to hosannas and dollars, or maybe she’ll decide to put it away in a drawer and write another one, using everything she’s learned from the first. But she’s a working writer now, instead of a wishful thinker, and her talent is getting the exercise it needs to grow.

First steps are supposed to be small and manageable, remember? That’s what makes it possible to do them. And “Become a good painter” or “Write a best-seller” is not a small, manageable step. It’s a major goal. If you ever want to get there, take my advice and make your first steps something like, “one *bad* page a day” or “one roll of *bad* photographs a week.” You will tighten up your standards later—when you have the experience to match them. In the meantime, remember the lesson of SuperFool: the worst you produce can’t possibly be as bad as the worst you can imagine. And you might also like to remember this cheerful piece of advice from Robert Townsend: “Anything worth doing is worth doing badly.”

### *The Graduated-Risk Principle*

Raising a talent or ability is like raising a child. When you start out, you need to be allowed to make any kind of mess you want. No one should criticize you—least of all yourself. As your competence grows, it can be given simple tasks to master, then gradually harder ones; it can be introduced little by little to wider and more discriminating audiences. You’ve got to pace new challenges and demands so that your skill gets stretched a little more each time, but never snapped or hopelessly outdistanced. A good basic principle is: “Your reach should always be one step ahead of your grasp.” You can build this kind of graduated risk right into your planning.

The safest arena is solitude. You don't want to get stuck there, but it's the place to start if other people's eyes make you feel judged and self-conscious. Robert, a New Journalist, developed his own distinctive style by keeping journals that no one ever saw. Matthew didn't have show his first "bad" drawings to anyone. When no one is watching you can play freely, and that freedom of movement is crucial for discovering and developing the natural direction of your talent. Training and discipline can come later.

Unless your creative goal is just for your own private pleasure, the next step should be to set a *target date* for venturing out and showing your work to someone else. Make it your family or a close friend—someone who is not an expert in your chosen field. At this stage of the game you don't want professional critical judgment, you want loving appreciation. You need to experience the world as a welcoming place. Your family and friends will think you're fabulous, and their praises and suggestions will help you discover that it's safe to be your growing self in front of others' eyes. Only then can you move into a more impersonal and demanding arena.

After Matthew had been showing his drawings to his friends for a few weeks he wanted to start getting some training, but he still got the shakes at the thought of being up against other students in the competitive atmosphere of a classroom. He realized that he knew a woman painter who taught in her home, so he arranged to take private lessons for a while. After just a month he had gotten enough guidance and encouragement from that teacher to sign up for drawing class at a small art school. From there he "graduated" a few months later to painting classes at a major art school.

Matthew had to cope with the fear of not being good enough, and he was only studying painting for his own pleasure! That's how tyrannical our inner critics are. But what if your goal requires that you meet a combination of inner and outer standards—like Andrea, who wanted to become a famous photographer? Her first goal was "To publish one or more photographs of celebrities in a quality national magazine." And one of her problems was, "I'm afraid I'm not good enough." Since creative "self-confidence" breaks down to nothing more mysterious than practice and graduated outward confirmation, you can brainstorm it just like any other strategic problem. That's what Andrea did.

"Problem: I can't because I don't have X—X, in this case, being 'Knowing I'm good enough.' Then Question No. 1, 'How can I get it without X?'"

becomes, ‘How can I get my goal without knowing I’m good enough?’ I can’t. If I don’t have at least some confidence in my ability, I know I’ll never even approach a magazine editor. I don’t want to make a total fool of myself. So I’d better try Question No. 2: ‘All right—how can I get X? How will I know when I’m good enough to show my work to magazine editors?’”

Notice that that’s a question like “How will I know when I’m a movie star?” It cries out for a *target*—a clearly defined action or event. If Andrea waited till she felt good enough, she’d never march up to an editor’s door, because that kind of subjective self-confidence vanishes like a mirage in the throes of stage fright. So what Andrea did was to set up an *external confirmation* of her ability that she’d have to accept even if she was terrified: “I’ll know I’m good enough when a professional photographer whose work I respect tells me so.”

Now Andrea could ask herself, “How will I know when I’m good enough to show my work to a professional photographer?” She set an adequate but firm limit to the amount of “safe” practice she allowed herself: her answer was, “After three months of taking pictures and showing them to my friends.” At that point, she could ask her network of friends to give her a personal introduction to a photographer, which would put the “test” in an informal context and make it less intimidating.

The fact is, however, that no matter how prepared you are, *each time you move to a higher level of performance or a more exacting audience, you’re going to get scared all over again*—like a diver who’s gotten very comfortable on the three-foot board, but feels sick the first time he has to go off the ten-footer. If it’s true that you cannot be overprepared, it’s equally true that you will never be ready. That’s why you had to set definite data for each step in your plan. The moment comes when you’ve got to act, ready or not.

I sometimes think the biggest single difference between men and women is that if a boy is scared of something, he has to do it anyway or face ridicule, while a girl is allowed to chicken out without too much disgrace—and sometimes with approval. Timidity is supposed to be “feminine.” Of course, that ethic is changing now. But it’s one of the reasons why so many of us grown women missed out on the experience that would have freed us from the witch’s tower of inaction, fantasy, and fear.

I want you to have the experience of moving right through fear. Because there's only one way to get really burned—and that's to stop because you're scared. *That's what real failure is.* Look back over your life, and I think you'll find that your cop-outs have cost you much more than your worst mistakes. When you fell on your behind, at least you learned that the ground is hard and you're not made of glass. But when you quit, you didn't learn anything.

Let's suppose that you've taken care of Survival Message No. 1 or No. 2. (There's a third powerful survival fear—the fear of being alone—that we're going to deal with separately, because you can't deal with it by yourself.) All that's left now is the last barrier: stage fright. You bust through that once, and you're home free. The next four steps are to help you do it.

### HARD TIMES REPRISE: BE SCARED

If you feel scared before you make a difficult move, don't fight it. Let yourself be scared. It's your body's natural response to novelty and uncertainty, and it's designed to tune you up to peak readiness—not to paralyze you. It's only the fear of fear that can do that, not fear itself.

The hard time is the day or the hour *before* you go into action. This is when all the frank physical symptoms of fear show up. You may feel like you're going to have a heart attack, or not make it to the bathroom. But all that's really happening is that you're anticipating, the energy of readiness is revving up, and it doesn't have an outlet yet. So give it an outlet. Move. Pace the floor, punch the wall, shred paper, shiver, dance. Make noise. Moan, complain, growl, swear, scream, and cry. I will never understand why we were taught that we had to behave like Mature Adults under these circumstances. Let's dispense with maturity. If you're doing difficult, scary, grown-up things that are right for you, that's enough. You shouldn't have to act like a grown-up too. You have the right to act like an absolute infant—right up to the moment when you walk through that door or the voice on the other end of the phone says “Hello?”

Obviously you can't allow yourself to fall apart in an “onstage” situation. A bad mood under fire is the luxury of losers. So just do your falling apart beforehand—and afterwards! Throw a tantrum in the wings before you make your entrance—it will get the energy flowing. Then, when the heat is on, be

a pro. When you came offstage” and it’s all over, you can go to pieces—you have that relief to look forward to. Minimize the heroics. It will help you concentrate them where they really count—in the action itself.

## TASK THERAPY

When the moment comes, and your hand is on the doorknob or your toes are wiggling out over thirty feet of space, follow one simple rule:

DO IT RIGHT, DO IT WRONG, BUT DO IT.

Squeeze your eyes shut and jump. Because a wonderful thing happens then. Your focus shifts from yourself, your nervousness, and your imagined inadequacies to the task at hand.

The trouble with the debate about “self-doubt” versus “self-confidence” is that it has you thinking about yourself at all. You may have noticed that at the times when you’re feeling best, you do very little thinking about yourself. You are a background of awareness, not an object in the foreground. You only focus attention on yourself when you feel bad. And then, of course, you can’t see anything else. It’s hard to tear your eyes away from the worry: “What’s *wrong* with me? Why am I depressed/scared?”

Insight therapy takes those questions seriously and seeks the causes in your past. It’s fascinating and helps you feel better, but it doesn’t necessarily lead to action. “Task therapy” says, “All that’s wrong with you is that you’re human. You’re full of mixed feelings and unresolved conflicts. So what? You’ve got a job to do. Do it.” The funny thing is that the minute you switch your attention from the unsolvable problem inside you to the solvable problem in front of you, you feel a surge of energy and relief. And afterwards, looking at what you accomplished in one hour will do more to heal your self-doubt than ten hours of self-analysis.

## DON'T BE AFRAID OF MISTAKES

“Yes, but what if I make a terrible mistake? What if I fail?”

Well, what if you do? What's so terrible about that?



Many grown-up people feel that one failure, setback, or mistake will be a sign of ultimate defeat and worthlessness. But look at any child learning to walk! That child will have to fall down at least a hundred times before it masters the art, and instinctively it knows it. Watch what any 1-year-old does when she falls down. She has a fit—not so much in pain as in impatience and fury. Then she crawls over to the nearest chair leg, pulls herself up, and tries again. If that child fell down once and gave up, she would never learn to walk. And that’s a beautiful model for every kind of learning.

*You will never learn or accomplish or create anything of value if you cannot let yourself make mistakes.* All successful people know this. You tell a top achiever in any field, “I failed. I feel like giving up,” and she or he will say, “You’re crazy.” Herman Melville, of *Moby Dick*, went so far as to say, “He who has never failed somewhere . . . cannot be great. Failure is the true test of greatness.” And this is from a *Quest* magazine profile of rock climber Royal Robbins:

It’s disturbing, perhaps, to think of Robbins, one of the greatest climbers alive, as losing his hold and falling—after all, if *he* falls, what about us?—but the reason has nothing to do with lack of ability. Robbins falls when he attempts something that is at the very limit of his powers, and it is his nature always to extend these limits. He expects a fall and is prepared for it.\*

There is a strange and comforting relationship between failure and preparation. It’s a common assumption that if you really try your hardest to get something and don’t get it, you’ll be shattered—so it’s safer not to risk going all out. That is totally false. The exact opposite is true. If you’ve prepared for every contingency you can imagine, and then it doesn’t work out, you won’t feel so bad. You’ll just say, “Damn! Well, three cheers for me, I really tried,” and go on to the next thing. *You never feel really bad when you’ve given something your best shot.* You may be disappointed, but you don’t blame yourself. But if you haven’t given it your best shot, you feel terrible. Because you never really know whether you could have done better . . . but you do know you could have done more. Win or lose, all-out efforts leave you feeling clean and good about yourself.

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\* James Salter, “Man Is His Own Star: Royal Robbins and the Art of Pure Ascent,” *Quest* vol. II, no. 2, March–April 1978, p. 28.

## REWARD YOURSELF

I do not happen to be a believer in the cliché that “Virtue is its own reward.” As far as I’m concerned, the reward for virtue should be at least a chocolate sundae, and preferably a cruise to the Bahamas. Virtue is damned hard work and frequently uncomfortable. Yes, the results are satisfying in themselves—immensely so. But the satisfaction of accomplishment is much too complex, adult, and uncertain a reward to promise the frightened child in you. S/he needed something simple, sure, and sweet to look forward to, like a lollipop after getting a shot. And I bet you never said “No, thanks,” to the lollipop afterwards because your relief and pride were enough! You took all the goodies you could get. And you still should. The more you give yourself, the less vitamin deficiencies you’ll have.

There are not one but two kinds of rewards you should plan to make a regular feature of your success program.

The first is the kind of reward you earn. You get to look forward to it before you do a hard thing, and then to savor it afterwards. It could be a big helping of your favorite food—or your favorite avoidance pattern: an old John Wayne movie, a fat paperback family saga, a long-distance phone call. It could be a daydream of lying on the beach on the most beautiful island in the Caribbean, or of the life you’ll lead when you’ve reached your goal. It could be a day in the country, a hot oil massage, a new pair of earrings, that fishing rod or Picasso poster you’ve been wanting for so long. Give yourself little extravagances for little steps, big ones for big steps, and a real whopper when you reach your goal: a whole new wardrobe or a set of matched golf clubs or a fabulous vacation. This kind of reward keeps things sweet instead of Spartan and prevents you from developing a permanently stiff jaw on your way to success.

The second kind of reward is the kind you should give yourself often just because you’re you, and worth it—whether it’s cooking a gourmet meal for yourself, taking a long, hot bath, or buying yourself a new sport jacket, a jazz record, or a theater ticket. This kind of reward is as important for the health of your self-image as physical exercise is for the health of your body. You must treat yourself like a first-class person, no matter what you’ve done or not done.

Don't ever punish yourself for skipping a step—or ten steps—in your plan by cutting out these little ways of being good to yourself. You need them more than ever when you're feeling down. They remind you that you have every right to be on earth and enjoy it just because you're alive. You need and deserve some pleasure at all times. When you've accomplished something, you get an extra helping on top of that for having been willing to undergo the discomfort of risk and change.

So, to sum up my six-point program for coping with the shakes:

1. *Survival Message No. 1: PREPARE.* Get information, advice, instruction, and practice.
2. *Survival Message No. 2: LOWER YOUR STANDARDS—AT FIRST.* Begin in a risk-free arena and gradually work your way up.
3. **BE SCARED.** Use Hard Times to release fear and tension before and after a difficult step.
4. **TASK THERAPY:** Focus your attention on the task, away from yourself.
5. **DON'T BE AFRAID OF MISTAKES.** They hurt you much less than stopping for fear of them.
6. **GIVE YOURSELF REWARDS.** Be nice to yourself at all times and extra nice to yourself when you've done something hard.

### SURVIVAL MESSAGE NO. 3

Now, however, we have to talk about the third survival fear and its message. I'm talking about the fear that success will be cold and lonely—that gut feeling that you'll leave your friends and loved ones behind, or that they'll be mad at you for being “selfish” enough to put your dreams and plans first. “It's lonely at the top” is a common cliché, one powerful enough to scare many women and men away from the highest peaks of achievement. But it's even truer to say that it feels like it's going to be lonely *outside*—outside the comfortable, if constricting, nest of other people's expectations. When you start moving, changing the status quo, you shake up everyone around you, too. And yet, that is the moment when you need their support the most.

*You need much more emotional security for risk-taking than you do if you stay within the safe, predictable bounds of habit.* Going for your goals involves not only uncertainty, change, and the unknown, but a new and scary feeling of being visible. You are no longer hidden behind a low profile that attracts little attention, expectation, or envy. You're laying your real self on the line, making promises you'll be expected to keep, and making waves people are bound to notice. And that feels dangerous. But if you have even one positive partner around saying, "Your idea is wonderful. You're wonderful. Stick with it. I'm with you," you've got the warm weight of another body right beside you on that line.

I don't know if anyone's ever done a statistical survey, but I have the impression that the overwhelming majority of successful men get this kind of support from their wives (with booster doses from their secretaries and sometimes their mistresses). I can't remember reading a book by a man the acknowledgments of which didn't end something like, "And last, but not least, my wife, without whose unfailing support and help . . ." A well-turned-out woman smiles beside every senator, and it's a truism in the business world that an unmarried young executive is handicapped for the climb. There is also the fact that the majority of widowers remarry within a year or two of their loss. They can't make it alone—and they've got sense enough not to try. Less well known is the fact that successful women have had exactly the same kind of support in their lives, sometimes from a woman friend, but very often from a man. Look at Virginia Woolf and George Eliot. Look at Bella Abzug and Jacqueline Susann!

Where does that leave those of us who aren't getting that kind of support? In trouble. In double trouble, because at the moment when we need *more* love and encouragement—when we start moving out for our goals—we're likely to get *less*. If you're a woman, your husband, lover, and/or kids may react angrily to the rerouting of so much of your attention away from them. After all, they've been used to getting the whole pie! That not only leaves you all alone out there, it puts you under fire at a time when you're shaky enough already. It can make you feel like giving up your goals or your family, neither of which is a very happy solution. There are men who have this problem too—men whose wives are willing to support some kinds of success but not others, the secure or managerial but not the creative or domestic, the executive but not the carpenter or restaurateur.

If you are one of those women—or men—your survival fear is real. The fear of being alone becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy if you think you have to walk out or sue for divorce in order to be free to pursue your goals! That fear isn't weakness, to be overcome by toughening up and caring less. It's a survival message: "You can't go for your goals without emotional support. So *get* it." That's going to take some strategy. The next chapter tells you how.