You are Entering the No-Excuse Zone

My original plan for this introduction was to self-righteously expound on how one should always prepare for the unexpected with the implication (albeit without saying so outright) that I always hit my deadlines right on the mark.

Unfortunately, this has been one of THOSE weeks. I announced to my accountability group last Friday that I would complete the first 8000 words of this book by a week from this coming Monday. It's Friday, and I have two paragraphs written. Seriously, it has been a week and a half. It was payday, and that kills a day. My car was in the shop for repairs. I got sick. So, I missed a lot of days writing. God does know how to humble one.

Will I make my deadline? I don't know. I may. I've fought my way through tighter ones. However, I will not offer any excuses. That's a rule in our accountability group. Why? Because excuses are irrelevant. Whether I had a good reason for failing to finish 8000 words or not, the fact remains I did not complete them. Having a good excuse or a bad one won't change that.

Excuses won't get my book written. Time spent at the keyboard is the only thing that will. There is no blame here. Failing to meet a deadline is not a moral failing where I need a good excuse. However, it is a practical matter. I will not get this book out on my schedule if I don't write those words within that time frame. That means I will not complete other projects in my queue on schedule. Which, in turn, means I will write fewer books this year, and I will make less money. A good excuse or a bad one won't change that outcome.

Excuses: The Poison Pill of Success

First, we need to understand the psychology of the excuse and something about our dysfunctional relationship with failure. Let's start with failure.

Most of us equate failure with some moral lapse. We didn't just fail. We failed because we are bad people. If we had been good people, we would have succeeded. As someone said, "The only 'sin' left in our society is failure."

However, failure is morally neutral. You are not a good person if you succeed. Neither are you a bad person if you fail. However, even though I understand this intellectually, my cultural programming kicks in, and I become more interested in explaining away my failure than I am in learning from it.

The problem with trying to explain why I did not accomplish what I set out to accomplish is that I end up spending more time avoiding blame than I do attempting to solve the problem. An excuse does nothing to address how I can learn from this particular

failure. I am so busy scrambling to avoid taking responsibility for the failure that I never get around to correcting those factors which led up to the failure. Therefore, I am likely to repeat that same failure and give the same excuse in the future.

On the other hand, I must be careful that, in recognizing failure as being morally neutral, I do not remove the pain from the failure. A good excuse does more than keep me from being blamed by others for my failure. A good excuse also keeps me from feeling responsible for that failure and being hurt by it. However, without some pain, there is no motivation for me to improve my performance in the future.

This is the reason that I say that excuses are the poison pills of success. Success comes from failing, learning from the failure and applying what you of learned. However, the excuse cycle is failing, finding an "unavoidable" reason for that failure and doing nothing to improve my chances of success later on.

As long as I believe that I could have done nothing to change the outcome, I will likely fail the next time I face a similar situation. Moreover, I am going to start looking for "unavoidable" reasons every time I fail. I would do this even when the failure was avoidable.

So what does this have to do with writers? Writers are famous for setting goals. They are equally famous for failing to reach those goals. However, when we fail, instead of facing up to our roles in those failures and looking for solutions, we tend to look for excuses instead.

Take this last week. I set a goal of 8000 words in two weeks. I write about 1500 words an hour. All I needed to do was write 30 minutes a day to meet that goal with time to spare. I only needed three 10-minute writing sprints a day. So, what happened?

A week ago, right after I sat my goal, I got my regular retirement check. Payday was two days after I set my deadline. I have problems with asthma, and I live in an area which has some of the worst air pollution in the country. On payday, the air quality was rated "Unhealthy." That means that adverse health effects are likely to happen to people like me if we go out. Moreover, that forecast was for the entire week.

However, I had some business I "had" to take care of. The next day I did the same. By then, my lungs were clogged up, and I was out of commission for two days. So, I'm four days behind. Then I began teaching a new course, and I needed to get ready for that.

I have lots of legitimate excuses for getting behind. However, making them will do nothing to get this course written. The only thing making excuses will do is to lull me into believing that, because it "wasn't my fault," no harm was done.

The Myth of the "Unexpected"

Excuses are also dangerous because they reinforce the myth of the "unexpected." Let's go back over my "excuses" for this week. I knew I had a payday coming. So, was it really "unexpected" that I would have to do some running around outdoors? I live in the third most polluted county in the country, so bad air days, especially during summer, are common. I scheduled the start of that class. It was on my calendar. So, how could I consider that unexpected?

Why didn't I take those into account when I set my deadline? I didn't think to do so. It's the most sensible thing to do. If that is the case, can I be excused for having a lapse of good judgment? Once I get my excuses out of the way, I can begin to figure out how to deal with this problem in the future. It's simple. Don't set deadlines close to the first week of the month. I need to assume I will lose most of that week to taking care of business and recovery from taking care of business.

I know what you are thinking. Yes, those are things that you can anticipate because they occur at a regular interval, but what about things which happen unexpectedly? Those are truly unexpected. Right?

It depends on what you mean by "unexpected." For instance, it's the middle of winter, and you work in a business that requires a good deal of personal contact. Is getting the flu unexpected? Not really. I can expect to get the flu every year. What is "unexpected" is the timing. I don't know when I am going to get the flu.

I can work with what I know. I can know that the flu usually catches me sometime between late October and early March. I know that it usually knocks me out totally for three days and reduces the amount of work I can do for a full week. So, if I am setting deadlines during flu season, I probably should allow for at least three extra days just in case I get the flu. If not, well, I can always use the extra time.

Because of my health, I have factored into my annual planning 25 sick and "gone fishing" days. These are days I can claim any time (as long as I don't have a set deadline for something) to recover from a health problem or to just rest.

If you make a list of "unexpected" emergencies, you will see they are not as unexpected as you think. Look at the following list:

Car repairs
Home repairs
Children's illnesses
Doctor's visits
Accountant appointments
Birthdays/anniversaries
Computer problems

Family visits
Overtime work at the day job
Church committee meetings

You probably lose the same number of hours each year (or very close to it) to each of these. When you know what percentage of your time is spent dealing with the unscheduled diversion, you can factor that into your figuring. We will talk at length about how to do that in an upcoming lesson.

I know what your next objection is. There are truly unexpected things that happen. Deaths, weddings, catastrophic illnesses, natural disasters. Some of these obviously will not only be distractions but will destroy your ability to work at all for extended periods of time.

Certainly, there is a limit to how much you can plan for. However, if you plan well for the expected but unscheduled emergencies, these truly unexpected events won't do as much damage.

Reality-Based Planning

Too many people make plans based on their hopes rather than their reality. Someone will say, "I want to write and publish a 200,000-word novel this year. Well, let's say you write 1000 words an hour and edit about the same. That's 400 hours. Figuring a five-day work week with two weeks off for vacation, you are left with 250 days. Figure 10 holidays. That's 240 days. If you add 20 family sick days, you are down to 220 days. Applying a bit of a buffer, you are looking at 2 hours a day or 10 hours a week to do that. Can you realistically commit to that much time? If you can, then commit to it and forsake your excuses. If you cannot, adjust your goals to match your reality. Either way, there's no need for excuses.

How this Course will Help

In this course, you will learn how to create reality-based plans, how to set a schedule you can live with and how to set realistic goals and meet them.

We will be gearing the information in this book to writing. However, many of the techniques we discuss can be applied to other endeavors you might have such as getting a degree, building a home-based business, training for a marathon, developing a ministry and more.

However, it all starts with you pledging with me to enter THE NO-EXCUSE ZONE.