

GRIT

GRIT by Angela Duckworth is the best book about writing that isn't about writing ever. Angela Duckworth is a brilliant psychologist at University of Pennsylvania who set out to scientifically prove the commonality between people in various fields who rise to the top of their professions. She wanted to know what made them unique, to find the recipe to their success, and to see if it could be replicated. She quickly discovered that the common factor was not intelligence or talent, which were the qualities to which the world often attributed their rise to the top. Duckworth found, through measurable studies and exhaustive interviews, that some of the smartest and most gifted people underachieve, while some of the less talented end up rising to the top. What she discovered was that *more critical than talent or intelligence was the ability to keep going after failure.* She discovered that more than luck or intelligence or talent, the characteristic that counted toward success was what she called *grit*.

Duckworth studied scientists and mathematicians, athletes and comic artists, puzzle-makers and soldiers, actors and anyone, it seemed, who would stand still long enough to be studied.

"The highly accomplished," she concludes, "are paragons of perseverance – they are the opposite of complacent. They chase something of unparalleled interest

and importance to them, as if the chase as much as the capture was gratifying. Even if some of the things they had to do were boring, or frustrating or even painful, the [highly accomplished] wouldn't dream of giving up."

Perhaps you hadn't noticed, but there are times when writing can be boring, frustrating, or painful. I can pretty much assure you that this will probably not go away, no matter how many books you publish. It certainly hasn't for me, and my colleagues lead me to believe that I'm not alone. When I was a novice writer, I thought the difficulty of it could be attributed to my lack of talent. I made a huge leap forward in my writing when I stopped expecting it to be easy.

At Vermont College of Fine Arts, where I have taught for over ten years, I have had some students who dazzled me with their raw, natural talent. I was eager to be the advisor who went down in history as the teacher of this gifted soul. And then, nothing. They don't finish. They don't rewrite. They don't persist. They don't publish.

Too many students of my students become discouraged and stop writing. I have wondered at times if they had persevered just one month longer, or one year longer, or five years longer, if they might have published that book and thousands of young readers would have had the joy of it.

Talent is a marvellous thing, and all of you in this room have it to one degree or another or you wouldn't be reading this – desire is the first indication of talent, in my opinion. But wondering if you have talent or how much talent you have is an

uphelpful distraction. I am convinced, have always been convinced, and am even more convinced after having read Duckworth's book, that the key to success as a writer is to *keep going after failure*.

I heard of a well-known writer once saying, "You can't teach writing. They either have it or they don't." I don't believe that for a minute. It doesn't even make sense – none of us came out of the womb ready to write a novel. None of our teachers pointed at us in kindergarten and said, "That one's going to be a writer." We become initiates when we engage with the written word with emotion and imagination. We begin a long journey of trying to write the stories we want to read and which other writers persist in refusing to write.

We learn to write bit by bit – we learn to construct a sentence. We learn what a beautiful sentence looks like. This is a huge moment. Great literature in one sense is the matter of one good sentence after another. We learn about the elements of story and managing the demands of a longer work of fiction. We are always endeavoring to master the small and big elements of storytelling.

Most human achievements, Duckworth explains, are in fact the aggregate of countless smaller, less dazzling elements, each of which is, in a sense, ordinary. If we can't explain how a writer has done something jaw-droppingly amazing, she says, we're inclined to throw up our hands and say, "It's a gift! Nobody can teach you that!" We can't easily see how hard and relentless work brings someone to a level of excellence beyond the norm, so we default to calling that person a natural. It lets us off the hook, she says.

When I first met my husband, he was impressed that I was a published writer. After we were married and living together, he of course watched as I wrote my next novel. He had thought I'd sit down, start typing page one, and keep on going until I got to the end – done and dusted. He saw instead that I rewrote and rewrote and rewrote to get my book to a publishable state. He was surprised and a bit dismayed. He never thought it would be so deliberate and slow and difficult. One day he said to me, “All this rewriting... isn't it cheating?” I assured him that if it was, everyone was doing it. He noted that this was the standard answer of all cheaters.

Duckworth quotes Nietzsche: “Our *vanity* promotes the cult of the genius. For if we think of genius as something magical, we are not obliged to compare ourselves and find ourselves lacking... To call someone divine means, here is no need to compete.” He continues, “Do not talk about giftedness, inborn talents. One can name great men of all kinds who were very little gifted. They *acquired* greatness, *became* geniuses... They all possessed that seriousness of the efficient workman which first learns to construct the parts properly before it ventures to fashion a great whole: they allowed themselves time for it because they took more pleasure in making the little, secondary things well than in the effect of the dazzling whole.”

I like the idea of the efficient workman. When I get up in the morning to write, if I tell myself my task is to create a work of fine art, I would have to go straight back to bed. Better to tell myself that all I have to do today is show up to the page and

perhaps write a sentence that makes me happy, maybe even a few sentences, that make me happy. I can face the daunting task of writing a whole novel only if I'm thinking in terms of the paragraph, the page, the chapter, this bit of dialogue, this perfect metaphor, these small elements to the best of my ability. It doesn't sound as romantic as sitting down and writing a book start to finish and sending it off to critical and husbandly acclaim, but unfortunately it's the only way.

Duckworth explains that *effort* factors into the equation for success twice. Talent plus effort equals a skill. Skill plus effort equals achievement.

Duckworth breaks grit down into four parts:

The four elements are:

1. Interest
2. Practice
3. Purpose
4. Hope

1. Interest

If what you do interests you, you are more likely to show up to the work and be satisfied with your work and want to do better work. This seems intuitive. I can assume that you are all highly interested in writing in general, since you're all with me here while I go on and on. But I have known a student or two who wanted to be published... but weren't that interested in the actual work involved. There's

nothing wrong with admitting that – your interests could be in other equally wonderful things. It's hard to imagine anything else being equally wonderful as writing, but the point is that you must be interested in the day to day work of writing in order to have the grit you're going to need to achieve. Are you interested enough to write every day? Contemporary life is so busy! But it is possible to find a little time every day. An hour? Half an hour? Ten minutes? When I was working at a business close to home, I wrote my fourth novel entirely on my lunch hours. When I was working in the city an hour from home, I wrote a novel on the commuter bus. If you are interested, you will show up every day to your work – daily attention encourages your brain to keep working on it even when you're thinking about other things. If you are interested in writing, then write every day. Except the Sabbath if you want God's help.

What about your work in progress? Are you interested in your work in progress? Involved? Curious? Invested? When you go about your day, do you sometimes think about your story? Is it the story you wish somebody would have written for you but never did? Of course, everyone has off days. There are days when I look at what I wrote the day before, rip it up and throw it away. But in general, are you interested in your work in progress? If you've lost interest, you've taken a wrong turn somewhere. You must go back to the place where you last remember being interested and start again from there. I often tell my students to write their "heart book." When I say that, I'm saying, write the book that will consume your interest.

In twelfth grade I decided that what I really wanted to do was write the *Lord of the Rings*. I dropped out of twelfth grade so I could do it. I found out that sadly somebody had already written the *Lord of the Rings*. I found out that writing even a short story was hard, so I stopped writing and went back to finish high school. After I married and had my first child, I tried writing again. It was still hard. I stopped. I had a second child and tried writing again. Still hard. When my fourth child was born I decided I would write even though it was hard. I had had an interest that had persisted for many years, but now finally I was ready to put in the effort to practice.

2. Practice

When she says practice, Duckworth is talking about a certain kind of practice. As a colleague of hers said, “Some people get twenty years of experience, while others get one year of experience twenty times in a row.” A fine writer wants every sentence, every page, every book to be better than the last. A fine writer wants to challenge herself. It isn’t just about hammering out page after page, year after year. It’s about surprising yourself, stretching yourself, overextending yourself, doing something you’ve never done before, or maybe something nobody’s done before.

Duckworth explains how, one by one, subtle refinements add up to mastery. The most complex and creative of human abilities can be broken down into its component skills, each of which can be practiced.

Deliberate practice requires working where challenge exceeds skill. It is exceptional effort. It can be exhausting. World-class performers at the peak of their careers can only handle small amounts of deliberate practice before needing a break.

Okay, so I believed all this in theory. But I confess that I didn't fully understand this whole notion of practicing. I didn't really get how it related to writing a novel. I had to think about it for a while.

While we are writing a novel, it's not like practicing the Grand Polonaise by Chopin. A pianist knows what that's supposed to sound like in the end. She goes over a phrase again and again and again for a year or two until she gets it perfect. But for us, in each new book we are groping about in a world we don't recognize. We don't know what done looks like. We don't know where we're going. We don't know if we're even going anywhere. Whatever we're doing, it hasn't been done before. We make little marks on paper, but we're always working at the edge of uncertainty. We're not practicing Chopin – we are Chopin, we are the composer. So what about this practicing Duckworth talks about? How does it relate to writing?

I have come up with my own interpretation. I prefer to think of practice less like the verb and more like the noun. A doctor has a medical practice. We have a writing practice, a profession, a career, a vocation. Yes, we also perform the activity of writing to acquire or maintain proficiency in it, so in that sense we practice. But when we write, we aren't practicing for a recital or a swim meet at

some point in the future. We are at the recital or the swim meet every time we pick up the pen. It's my belief that if we show up to our writing practice every day, we are practicing our craft.

This is an image of me practicing – depending on the book, I do lots of pre-writing – bits of setting, dialogue, character explorations. I do it now in journals – about twelve journals for *Buffalo Flats*, my current work in progress, before I actually started writing.

After I had completed a first draft of my new work in progress, I gave it to a friend to read. She didn't like it and she especially didn't like the protagonist. So I rewrote it, focusing on making my character likeable and relatable. A long time later, I gave it to my daughter to read. She liked the protagonist, but she didn't like any of the other characters. She said, "Mom, it's going to be great. All you have to do is start all over again."

I had to go back to work, to attempt to do what was frustrating, and at times painful. I had to work where challenge exceeded skill. I don't like practice. I will do anything to avoid practice. When I am in the depths of a book, my house is very clean. My television and cell phone are very hot. My bills are very paid. Avoidance behaviors abound. Duckworth has an answer for that, too. She suggests that, during these challenging times, you will have grit if you can make deliberate practice a *habit*.

Habit is a big part of your practice.

A mountain of research, she says, shows that if you will practice at the same time and place every day, you don't have to think about getting started. You don't have to decide every single day if you'll work. You just do. Duckworth notes the book *Daily Rituals* by Mason Currey. He studied the lives of 161 artists, scientists and other creators. He looked for something they all had in common, and the only thing he found was that they practiced daily rituals. These people were creatures of routine and habit.

Maya Angelou's routine is to get up and have coffee with her husband, and then by 7 am deliver herself to a tiny, mean hotel room with no distractions. There she stays until 2 pm. Most of us don't have lives that allow us to hole ourselves up in a hotel for seven hours a day. But the point is she has a routine she doesn't deviate from.

How do you establish a faithful routine? One that gets you writing every day without even thinking about it? The best routine is the one you can actually and practically do, every day, over a long period of time. Those of you who have routines that work well for you, I congratulate you. For those of you who struggle with this – who are in life situations that conspire to fill every moment of your life, I am going to offer a bit of advice.

Not long ago for one semester I was invited to teach a graduate writing class at BYU. I advised my graduate students that if they would get up at 5 am to do their writing before they did anything else, they would have a more productive semester. From the reaction in the room when I made this suggestion, I would

guess that most of them were not morning people. Most of them were single and dating, and maybe that had something to do with it.

A few, however, decided to take me up on my suggestion, and those who did truly made significant progress that semester. I saw the difference. They saw the difference. One talented young woman said, "I'm a different writer at 5 am, a better writer." Those who wrote later in the day and *kept* their routines also made good progress. But a few later-in-the-day writers were not able to keep to their routines because on some days their routines were disrupted by life. Once disrupted by life, it became easy to lose the rhythm of the routine.

The thing about 5 am is that there is no life at 5 am. The phone doesn't ring at 5 am. Most people don't want to know we exist at 5 am. Most husbands do not want to have long talks with you at 5 am. It doesn't feel right to put in a load of wash or scrub the floor at 5 am – it might wake up the sane people in the house. There's nothing on TV at 5 am. Early morning writing is so easily made into a routine that never has to change. You can get up and write at 5 am for years without anybody even knowing. One day you show them a book, and they wonder when on earth you managed to do that. I am in good company in my early morning writing time. Kurt Vonnegut wrote every day from 5:30 am until 8:00 am. E.B White started at 6 am. I know there's someone in the audience who is saying, I already get up at 5 am to do other worthy and necessary things. And that is why God invented 4 am. If you feel unconverted by my belief in the power of early morning writing, the real takeaway is to have a time every day that's sacred.

3. Purpose

Gritty writers need both interest and practice. But something that takes a writer to the next level is purpose, the thing that tells them that *what they do can benefit other people*. Grit paragons, Duckworth says, are not just goal-oriented – the nature of their goals is special because they see that all that work is worth it because what they do has *meaning and value* for others. Jeong Kwan is a 60-year-old Zen Buddhist nun who prepares vegan meals for her community at Baekyangsa Temple. Her food is renowned and considered as good as any food you might find in a three-star Michelin restaurant. But if you ask her how she became such a great chef, she would say, “I am not a chef. I am a nun.” She says she cooks because she wants the world to be united through healthy and happy food and to thrive together. She has had no formal training, but she does have a greater purpose, and that makes her good at her art.

The nature of art is that it is a deeper communication with other human beings, so by its very nature it is unselfish. Writers for the young perhaps have an even greater sense of purpose because we understand that we are making art for vulnerable and malleable minds and hearts of the upcoming, the trending, the movers and shakers to come. Young people are forming their identities and visions for the future, and our stories can be part of that miracle. Anyone here in this room who loved a book as a child will know that there are no defense mechanisms for a child reader – they are not jaded, they do not evaluate a book

based on theories, they don't read books because they're good for them or they want to be considered well-read. They take story into their minds and hearts, and they are a little different because of it.

John Gardner said, "Art cracks the door to the morally necessary future." As writers, and particularly as writers for the young, we are all about cracking open new doors. We are motivated by the desire, as Duckworth says, to seek a meaningful, other-centered life.

Having a purpose doesn't mean that you don't want to make money so you can write the next book. It certainly doesn't mean you set out to write heavy-handed message-y books with the sole purpose of "teaching" your reader something, however noble that message may be. We let our readers find their own meaning in a story, and if the story is good and honest and true, there will be room for readers to find a meaning unique to him or herself. But it seems intuitive to say that writers who are motivated by personal and prosocial interests will also do better in the long run. You understand that you can make a difference, even if only in the heart of one person. It helps you keep going on dark days.

Writing is purposeful even if the story you're writing doesn't aspire to change the whole world. Stories allow our minds to experience events and situations we've never actually experienced, and get to know people we've never met and consider a world view we had never before considered. Stories are magic and power. They are the God-given power to understand and even create reality. If you are creating, if you are telling a good story, you are doing something divinely

purposeful and extraordinary. Writing, and especially writing for children, is intrinsically purposeful.

4. Finally, Hope

There's an old Japanese saying: Fall seven, rise eight. The kind of hope Angela Duckworth is talking about is the kind that "rests on the expectation that our own efforts can improve our future." This kind of hope says, "I have a feeling I'll be a better writer tomorrow because I resolve to do the work necessary to be a better writer tomorrow."

In *Toy Story*, Woody says to Buzz Lightyear, "That wasn't flying, that was falling with style." I would say about all my books, "That wasn't writing, that was *failing* with style." I often feel that for me writing is an exercise in failing gracefully. Failing to write the scene you had in your head. Failing to write the book you had hoped to write. But Duckworth says, "It isn't suffering that leads to hopelessness. It's suffering you think you can't control." Martine says, if you blame your suffering on your life circumstances, your advisor, agents, editors, the market, your job, your troubled child, or anyone other than yourself, you have no control, and you begin to feel hopeless. But if you will turn that suffering over to your art, and to your faith if you are a person of faith, you will have hope, and that hope can be the thing that keeps you persevering after failure.

You will have hope if you just remember that the book doesn't fail until you give up, and your career hasn't failed until you give up, and of course, *you will never give up.*

Apparently temporary failure is de rigueur these days. Beatrix Potter had so much trouble publishing *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, she initially had to self-publish it. Madeline L'Engle received 26 rejections before publishing *A Wrinkle in Time*. Frank Herbert's *Dune* was rejected 20 times. Sylvia Plath was told in a rejection note, "There certainly isn't enough genuine talent for us to take notice." Rudyard Kipling was told, "I'm sorry Mr. Kipling, but you just don't know how to use the English language." Emily Dickinson was told, "[Your poems] are quite as remarkable for defects as for beauties and are generally devoid of true poetical qualities."

As a novice writer, for many months and even years, everything I wrote one day went into the garbage the next day. One day I actually didn't despise a little story I had written, so I sent it off to the *Children's Friend* magazine. Amazingly, they didn't want my story. They didn't want the next one, either, or the next. Another magazine and still another were uninterested in publishing my charming little stories.

One day I got a rejection letter with a written note on it. The note was peevish and sarcastic. The sarcasm impressed upon me that there was a lot more to this writing thing than I had initially anticipated. I wanted to learn to write a novel, so I decided perhaps I should take a class. Of course, to get into a good writing class,

one had to submit a portfolio. My portfolio consisted of all the pieces that nobody wanted, so unsurprisingly, nobody wanted me in their class. I was left with no choice: I had to teach *myself* how to write a novel.

That novel became a finalist for a provincial first-novel award. Based on that achievement, I was finally accepted into my very first writing class. The class was taught by the brilliant Tim Wynne-Jones. How lucky I was to have avoided being taught by some of those other lesser writers and get Tim Wynne-Jones as my very first teacher. How lucky I was, looking back, that some of my dreadful first efforts were not published, and are not out there haunting me still.

When I had published a fantasy novel with a small Canadian publisher called Red Deer Press, I tried to get into an undergraduate creative writing class at University of Calgary taught by Aritha van Herk. I submitted a copy of my one published novel for my portfolio, but she carefully explained to me in a personal interview that she didn't think I'd be good enough for her class. Well, I knew that. So I wrote and published another book and applied again. Not accepted. Did I care? No. Yes! Of course I cared. I published a third book, but after the third book I discovered Vermont College of Fine Arts.

My point is this: I wasn't any good for a long time, but I did one thing right. The thing I did right was that when someone told me I wasn't good enough, I took them at their word. And I got good enough. Not as good as I wanted to be, never as good as I want to be, but good enough. Hope isn't wishful thinking. Hope is a kind of mental toughness. It's believing that you *can* do this and you *will*.

Remember that, according to Duckworth, effort factors into the calculations twice, not once. Talent with effort gives you a skill. Skill with effort equals achievement. Grit is not just about staying loyal to your art, it's about falling in love and staying in love.

It takes time. If it is taking time for you, that's okay. Do not give up. Interest, practice, purpose and hope. These are what make writers. These qualities help us to persevere and keep our passion alive. Someone I deeply respect said, "You yourself are a masterpiece, created with a beauty, function, and capacity beyond imagination." Never give up on your work or on your dreams or on yourself. Be gritty.