

Article 17—Fear of Success

by AUTHOR

03.12.16

I absolutely dreaded moments where I had to be present, impress people, and stick the landings. Especially when I was still sweating out the last night's bottle of cabernet. I remember standing in an epic conference room in the high-rise office I worked in. Long-paneled windows opened up on a sweeping view of downtown: a panorama of flowered hills, bombed-out brick warehouses, and upscale restaurants dotting the riverfront. About a dozen publishing execs and marketing specialists sat around a long table, waiting for my presentation.

I just wanted to get the attention off me as soon as I could. But this is where promotions were born. *This is exactly how we sell digital newspaper subscriptions to senior citizens*, I began showing off my PowerPoint deck. *Here is all the expensive research we've done. Here are all the ZIP codes we should target. Here are examples of the messaging we should use.* I'd spent weeks on making the slides pretty, but I'd done zero work on the speech. I figured I'd just wing it, like I did everything, and trust adrenaline and luck.

As I spoke, people started nodding. I couldn't believe it. And that's when it happened: about sixty seconds in, I mentally folded up shop. I could feel it uncoil inside me like a broken spring. It was probably how stand-up comedians felt when they bombed, except I was doing it to myself. I could see it in my manager's eyes: pride bleeding into pity. She looked down. She couldn't bear to see a star employee going down so quickly and, worse, so willingly. But this was me at my alcoholic best.

I can't explain the black relief that came from not turning work in on time, skipping appointments, or ignoring obligations. I could handle regret far better than I could success. I did the same thing with my master's thesis. While graduate school was an amazing place to avoid the real world, I somehow managed to avoid actual work there, too. While my colleagues were busy in library, I spent hours at the local brewery, pretending to put important thoughts together down on legal pads. I was even hired to a part-time job wherein I had to teach Microsoft Access courses to fellow grad students. I hadn't done a day of Access database work in my life, but my alcoholic brain told me: *You can do anything. How hard can it possibly be?* Even with a three-month lead time, I decided to start teaching myself two days before I had to teach others. It did not go well.

Whenever I hear someone say "This exceeded my wildest dreams" or "This is way more than I could have ever imagined," I feel sorry for them—I really do. It's a reflex. I've always been able to imagine a lot, which is probably a weird side effect of knowing *Octopussy*, *Ghostbusters*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* by heart before I was ten. I knew fantasy, goddammit. When I was drinking, dreaming big was 90% of the problem. I kept assuming that the same fortune and glory that awaited Indiana Jones awaited me, this alcoholic nobody from rural Ohio. This view of success—like the plot twist of a Hollywood movie—didn't require any real work on my part. This kind of wishful thinking just required that I keep drinking.

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After one particularly bleak stretch of being unemployed, I got a job interview out of the blue. I prepared for it by getting my suit pressed and practicing interview questions in the mirror. I got a babysitter, left an hour early for the interview, and arrived with forty-five minutes to spare. I sat in the parking garage, watching the seconds tick by. My mother always taught us that if you're not early, you're late. But forty-five minutes early was just stupid. I couldn't stand the mounting tension and anxiety razored through me. So, I left the garage and bought a pint of vodka. It was just the carrot on the end of the stick. Just knowing it was in the car would give me strength. If things got dicey in the interview, I could envision it, paper-bagged on the passenger-side floor. Maybe I'd call on it like a spirit animal. Ten more minutes passed. I stared at the bag as intently as the doubts began flooding in. Certainly, they didn't want to interview *me*. No one would ever want to give *me* a job. They must have made a mistake. I *deserved* to be unemployed.

So I unscrewed the cap.

In the interview, I jumped up and play-acted things out; I told long and involved stories with great punchlines; I paced the room and did voices. At one point, I even high-fived one of the interviewers. No matter which way you cut it, I absolutely crushed that interview. No one saw *that* coming. Still, I killed that interview in the same way I killed my chances at putting food in my kids' mouths.

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Real success has always terrified me. When I was drinking, I assumed that if I ever achieved something I dreamed of, it'd automatically change who I was. That's a lot like being afraid of gaining weight because you start going to church. It's irrational. Also, I *needed* to change. As a drinker, I certainly always believed that I deserved success—promotions, relationships, material goods—even though I didn't. So, there was a lot of peace and security in doing the bare minimum and just getting by. I've always taken easy ways out because if I don't try, I can't get hurt. It's easier to not risk applying for a new job; it's easier to avoid after-work get-togethers. When you constantly avoid success, all that makes you good at is pulling punches, cutting bait, and pushing self-destruct buttons. You're not wired for anything else. And when you're always waiting for the bottom to drop out on your life, that's where drinking comes in really handy. It's the only constant you have.

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In sobriety, success is pretty much just me showing up when I say I will, and hearing myself say something that isn't complete and utter bullshit. End of story. I don't sabotage myself with self-pity, hiding from emotions, or going out of my way to please people anymore. I don't feel entitled to success, but I certainly don't go out of my way to ruin it anymore, either. Sometimes I succeed without trying; sometimes I fail when I actually spend time and energy. But the longer I'm sober, the more I realize success isn't some grand thing that suddenly happens to people. It's all the little stuff. I don't look back in anger and I don't look forward in fear. For the very first time, I'm present, which is its own success.