

Outline of Choose Your Own Writing Adventure Talk

In the last few years, I have become increasingly fascinated by choices. It is estimated that adults make 35,000 decision everyday. That number may seem wrong, but think about all the choices that you have made just in the last hour. You made choices about what you would put on your plate at dinner, where you would sit, what you would say, if you would clean up your tray. That's a lot of choices we get to make!

When I was growing up, Choose Your Own Adventure books were all the rage. As a child, it felt amazingly empowering to get to choose what kind of book I wanted to read. To get to say I want the character to do this. And we would read them multiple times, so that we could see all the different places that the book went. All the different story options.

That is what we are going to do tonight. And you are the main character, and we are going to look at your writing adventure and choices.

If you follow me on social media, or hang out at Go Teen Writers, you may already know that I am completely obsessed with this quote from Pastor Andy Stanley: "Decision by decision, you are writing the story of your life."

I think about this quote every day. It shapes the way I view my life, and for that I am grateful.

Here is how this plays out. I will have a morning at home with my youngest son, Eli. Eli's two and a half. The things he finds fun and enjoyable, I do not always find fun and enjoyable. I have learned, like most parents have, that sometimes I can get something else done while we interact with each other. So while he is coloring, I can also respond to comments on Instagram, or catch up with friends on Facebook.

But you know what I have started doing? When I catch myself doing this, I have started asking myself, "Is this what I want the story of my morning to be? That Eli colored by himself, and I pretended to be interested while I was really glued to my phone?"

No. Of course that is not the story that I want. But sometimes it is the story I choose to tell, the story I decide to create with my decisions.

And with how long I have been writing professionally, I have seen writers find themselves telling stories they never wanted to tell. Stories like this:

I didn't think that agent was right for me, but I signed anyway because a bad agent seems better than no agent.

Or

I was so stressed during my book release, that I didn't take care of myself and I put on 20 pounds.

Or

I am really passionate about immigration reform, but nobody wants to read about that. So I am writing romance novels instead.

And, so as not to pick on romance novels, "I really want to write romance novels, but I am afraid that everyone will think less of me."

So tonight, we are going to talk about the question, "What kind of writer do you want to be?"

The question is much bigger than what genre you write, or if you're traditionally or independently published. And the question, just like the Choose Your Own Adventure novels, often times isn't a choice between right and wrong, just different paths.

I love the way John G. Miller phrases this in his book, "QBQ!" which is about personal accountability:

The idea that we are accountable for our own choices and are free to make better ones is fundamental to the QBQ. Sometimes people think they have no choice. They'll say things like, "I have to" or "I can't." But we always have a choice. Always. Even deciding *not* to choose is making a choice. Realizing this and taking responsibility for our choices is a big step toward making great things happen in our lives.

There are things about your writing adventure that you will not get to choose. I didn't get to choose that I started writing before the online world was social. I didn't get to choose that my first book would release in an economic depression.

But you will always get to choose what kind of writer you want to be in the face of it. You will always get to choose how you react to new technology, new revenue streams, new story ideas.

And tonight we're going to look at choices that only you get to make:

Choice: Am I going to write today?

This is a decision that you get to make every day. Am I going to write today? Am I going to sit down with that short story or my notebook or my novel and work on it today?

There is nothing wrong with not being a writer who wants to write every day. I know there is a big push in the writing community to do that, and in theory I'm in favor of it, and the discipline you learn is important. But I don't think that we should feel like less than writers on the days that we choose not to.

What I am saying is that you have to own the choice. The choice is yours. I see lots of writers who spend time on social media complaining about how little writing time they have, and I get it. I have very little writing time too. But often I have found that if I am looking, I have more pockets of time than I want to think.

What I think the better question is, and what I would challenge you all to ask if you are really wanting to grow as a writer—or a creator in any capacity—is this. **When am I going to write today?**

When is a much more effective question. When means pulling up your calendar and saying, “I think I can fit it here.”

If you are like me, if you let yourself ask, “Am I going to write today?” then you spend a lot of time coming up with all the reasons why you can't. because what you really want is obvious and ideal time.

You are looking for an entire morning, or an entire afternoon. You are looking for time when you have already taken care of everything else on your to-do list. you feel inspired, and you can be guarantee that nobody is going to bother you.

But when you start asking, “When am I going to write today?” that is when you find the little pockets of time that add up to so much.

Often we want others to value our work first. To tell us that it’s important that we write today and here’s when we should do it. That’s a normal transition out of childhood. When I was a kid learning how to play soccer, my coach said, “Here’s when we’re practicing. And here’s what we’re going to practice.” People stop doing that when we’re older.

In *Rising Strong*, Brené Brown says, "I've learned...if you don't put value on your work, no one is going to do that for you."

As uncomfortable as it can feel at times, WE have to take the first steps in respecting our writing time. If you want people to respect the time you need to create and what you're creating, you will have to lead. You have to choose, “This is the adventure I want to go on. This is when I’m going to write.”

Choice: What am I going to do with my fear?

I’m afraid of a lot of things. In general and with writing.

There are so many times that I have to remind myself, “All I’m doing is typing words into a document. I don’t need to be scared of doing that.”

Fear is a part of creating. It just is. Elizabeth Gilbert says lots of things about fear and creativity that I really love in her book, *Big Magic*.

“Your fear will always be triggered by your creativity, because creativity asks you to enter into realms of uncertain outcomes, and fear *hates* uncertain outcomes.”

What we get to choose in our creative adventure is what we're going to do about the fear. Is that how we're going to make decisions? From fears? How do I think that's going to play out?

I guarantee you that you don't want your story to be, "I didn't do anything with writing because I was afraid." You may decide for lots of good reasons that you don't want to publish or pursue a career in writing, but fear is not a good reason.

Choice: What am I going to write?

I know that can be a complicated question to answer. Partly because of the fear thing, maybe we're afraid of what people are going to think. Also because sometimes our interests are really varied and we don't know how to choose.

I was always drawn to writing young adult fiction, even before I realized that was a genre that existed. And I thought I would outgrow it. But even after I got out of high school, that was what I was naturally inclined to write.

What I wanted to write was serious literature, like authors my English teacher praised. Toni Morrison. Barbara Kingsolver. I tried super hard to come up with ideas for these kinds of books, and I just felt blocked. I couldn't come up with a single thing.

And it was 2003, so I was flipping through a Delia's catalog when I came across an advertisement for several contemporary YA series. This changed my writing career, because I realized that I wanted to read these books. All of them. I was a little embarrassed by that (What would Maya Angelou think?) but I did. Not only that, but I thought, "This is what I want to write. I want to write contemporary YA fiction."

That was a big moment for me of deciding, "This is the writing adventure I'm choosing. I'm choosing to write for teens, even though I feel a bit uncomfortable about it. It also feels right."

I could've chosen to stay with literary fiction and be a frustrated,

blocked writer. It would've been a very boring adventure.

It's okay if you don't know what you want to write. It's okay if you're still exploring that. It's okay if your friends write other genres, or if you feel like your genres isn't as acceptable as others.

None of my writer friends write the same genre as me. My closest writer friends write

- Christian historical romance
- Christian speculative fiction for adults and teens
- General market speculative fiction for teens
- General market nonfiction memoir type stuff.

And still we can sharpen and encourage each other. We don't need to judge what each other is writing. We just don't.

Nobody but you is asking you to be Maggie Stiefvater or C. S. Lewis or Jill Williamson or whoever else you look up to and admire. We have those people and their stories already, we need your uniqueness. Your creativity. Your stories. And you're the only one who can do the hard work of figuring out what those stories are.

Choice: Am I going to reach out and connect with others?

Asking for help:

This is one of the early decisions you have to make if you are going to be a writer or pursue a creative path in any way. You have to decide that you are going to go get it. That you were going to go on the adventure at all because nobody is going to make you. The only season of my life that I ever had to write was when I took a creative writing class for a semester in high school. Other than that, I have had to chase down every idea. I have had to chase down every opportunity.

Getting social:

This is where the most value is in social media, by the way. If you're wanting to build your presence, build your platform, then I strongly advise helping other authors. Follow them on social media, interact with them,

offer to help with releases. Promote books you love.

This can be uncomfortable, but it's huge when it's your turn and you need favors and endorsements.

Critiques:

This is how you get better. How you grow. Writers ask me all the time how you know if you're ready for an agent or editor, and my honest answer is, "When an agent tells you, 'This looks good. I'm interested in working with you.'" I sent out so many queries and partial manuscripts before I was really ready for an agent, but it's an impossible thing to judge for yourself, so I just kept trying to get better and kept sending it out. Until finally one of them was like, "This is great. Let's work together."

It's awful and uncomfortable at times. You have to be brave.

Choice: What kind of attitude am I going to have?

My senior year of high school we read *Music for Chameleons* by Truman Capote. There was a forward written by him in the beginning, and the way he described creativity really confused me. (See slide)

This wasn't at all what I experienced when I wrote. I was only 17, and I did not have near the experience that he did, so I thought maybe eventually I would understand what he meant.

I am now 34, and have been working as a published writer for over 10 years and I still don't understand what he's talking about.

You may be thinking that I don't have a right to an opinion about this, which is what I thought when I was 17. Who am I to critique someone great like Truman Capote?

I have certainly had some low times with the writing business. I have gone through droughts. I have been a disappointment to my publishing house, which no writer wants to be.

And I have had books that are difficult. I joked that *Within These Lines* was going to be the last book I ever wrote because it was hard. But I

have never felt like creativity was using a whip on me or painful to me in any way. Or that God punished me giving me a passion for writing.

I don't mean to criticize Mr. Capote as a person, but I just don't think it has to be that way. I don't even think it's particularly helpful, even if you write gothic horror novels. Feeling like you are an abused slave to your creativity, or pretending to be that, is not very sustainable.

In *Big Magic*, Elizabeth Gilbert says, “If it’s bad for you, then it’s bad for your creativity too,” and instead encourages artists to work from a place of stubborn gladness. I think that’s a much healthier way to pursue creativity and writing.

Choice: Am I going to keep growing?

Some writers have just one book they want to write and their goal really is to publish that book and then be done with it. But if writing is Your Thing and you intend to pursue it for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health until death do you part, then don’t make the mistake of assuming that getting published is The Goal.

Instead the goal of the professional writer should be to grow. Unlike getting published, “to grow” is a writing goal you will never fully accomplish. You will never cross this off your to-do list. If you’re like me, that thought might make your eye twitch, but recently I’ve become excited by the idea that there’s no limit on my potential growth as a writer.

I read this quote several years ago in one of John Maxwell’s book, and it’s one that often resurfaces in my thoughts:

“Every life form seems to strive to its maximum except human beings. How tall will a tree grow? As tall as it possibly can. Human beings, on the other hand, have been given the dignity of choice. You can choose to be all or you can choose to be less. Why not stretch up to the full measure of the challenge and see what all you can do?” - Jim Rohn

You have the choice about growing as a writer, or as a creator. That means part of the adventure you choose is how far you’re going to go, how much you’re going to challenge yourself.

Choice: Am I willing to fail?

There's that question about what would do if you knew you wouldn't fail, that I think is not a great question. I think the better question is, "What's worth it to you even if you know you will fail?"

The most important things in my life are things that I've taken a risk on even knowing there will be pain and mistakes and flat-out failure at times. Marriage. Having kids. Publishing books. Following Jesus.

I struggle with perfectionism, which is just fancy, socially acceptable fear, if we're being honest.

If you fail, it'll be okay.

My first book tanked. It was awful and embarrassing, but I'm okay. And I'm still writing. If my contemporary YA titles had taken off, I never would have started writing historicals, and I'm so happy with that.

My first blog failed. The only person who read the first blog I created was my mom. I learned from it. If that blog had been successful, I never would have started Go Teen Writers.

I tried hard to write perfectly, blog perfectly, publish perfectly. And it just doesn't exist.

I'm going to close this out with some words about fear and failure from K. M. Weiland.

In a couple weeks, K. M. Weiland is going to be our guest on Go Teen Writers. One of the questions we asked her was, "If you could go back in time and give yourself a piece of advice the night before your first book hit shelves, what would you say?"

Her answer was:

"Don't be afraid."

I look back at my career so far, and I'm very proud of it. I was constantly running, constantly working, constantly thinking. And I did cover a lot of ground. But I can see now that one of the reasons I ran so fast was because there was always something I was afraid of nipping at my heels: fear of failure, fear of not being good enough, fear of not selling enough books or getting enough good reviews.

If I could do it over again, I would like to try to reach for all these positive goals from a more positive place. I would like to slow down and enjoy the journey more rather than focusing so obsessively on the end goals. I think it would have helped me create healthier lifestyle habits along the way.

It's easy to lose the joy of writing amidst the frantic pursuit of success."

Whatever your writing adventure looks like, that's what I hope for you. That even when it's hard or you've fallen down or veered away from where you wanted to be, that you can still find joy and feel stubbornly glad that you're a writer.