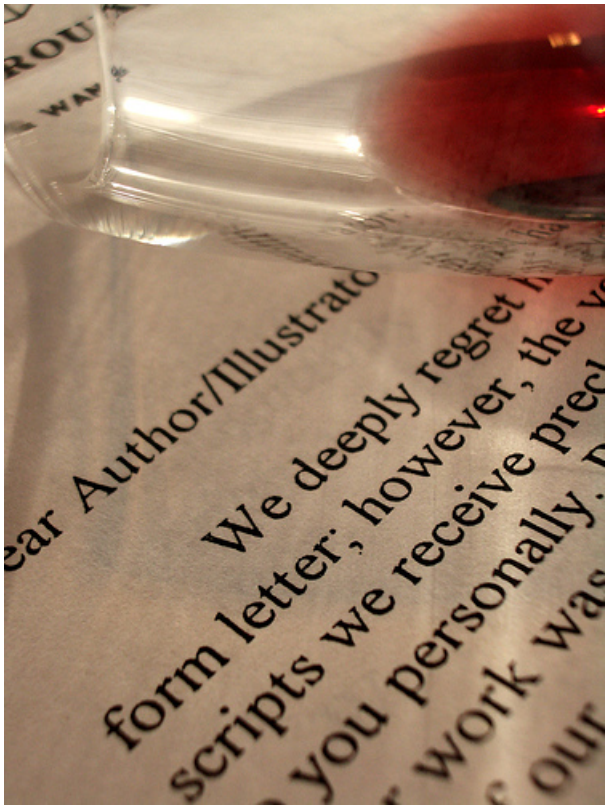
Self-Doubt: The Worst Distraction for Writers [1]

November 11, 2013 Advice [2]
Distraction [3]

Theme Essay by Tarn Wilson

You're a Fake! Self-Indulgent! Mediocre! Why Bother?

After a decade of struggling to take myself seriously as a writer, I set up my new red desk in front of my picture window. I reduced my teaching hours, simplified my schedule, and rejoined my writing group. Most important, I carved out eight hours a week for writing.



[4]I diligently followed the standard advice about how to master distractions and defend my writing time: No other appointments. No phone calls or emails. No superfluous Internet searches. Slowly, I finished the essays I'd always intended to write—and I was thrilled by this radical, positive change in my life.

So thrilled, in fact, I didn't foresee the next obstacle: the tsunami of rejections.

Instead of managing the deluge of emails and envelopes with the grace of the professional, I was crushed by them. Discouragement washed over me like ocean waves—heavy, disorienting, and bruising. I could barely find the strength to pick myself up, soaked and sandy, and crawl back to my red desk.

I was managing my external distractions but immobilized by my internal ones. I'd assumed the path to writing success

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was linear, supported by refined goal setting and time management. I didn't count on the messy emotional journey it would require.

First, I tried reasoning with myself.

If you don't risk rejection, you'll never publish. Remember the odds; fine literary journals receive thousands of submissions for every acceptance. Rejection means only that your essay isn't a match or needs revision, not that you're lacking in worth or potential.

I believed! Intellectually. But, as the months rolled on, my beliefs weren't strong enough to hold me upright. I began to question not only my writing, but my character.

You're WAY too sensitive. You're boring, and your writing is, too. You have unrealistic expectations. You're too dependent on affirmation. You aren't skilled enough to be published and never will be. Who are you to spend leisurely hours writing essays no one will ever read when there is so much REAL work to be done?

Since logic wasn't working, I needed a new tactic. Inspired by my reading of Buddhist books, I decided that instead of criticizing my emotions, I'd just observe them. I gently named my feelings as a kind friend or mother would.

Oh, you're disappointed. You worked a long time on that essay. You really admire that magazine and hoped they'd want your piece.

This simple recognition—soothing words cooed over a crying toddler—eased my anxiety. When I acknowledged my feelings, with compassion and without judgment, they quickly passed, leaving behind no incapacitating debris.

Occasionally, though, I'd still be washed by grief far deeper than any literary rejection should warrant—one which naming couldn't loosen. I decided to spend more time with those feelings. I stared directly at that disappointment-and-discouragement-tinged-with-anguish. It felt familiar.

Childhood.

I never wanted that to be the answer; it's such a cliché. But there it was again.

As a child, I'd concluded that I was most valued when I listened, when I was an attentive and supportive audience. My mother suffered from borderline personality disorder, which meant her emotional needs were as enormous and consuming as the dramas she created. I was punished if I made myself the hero of my own story or had a point of view not aligned with her reality.

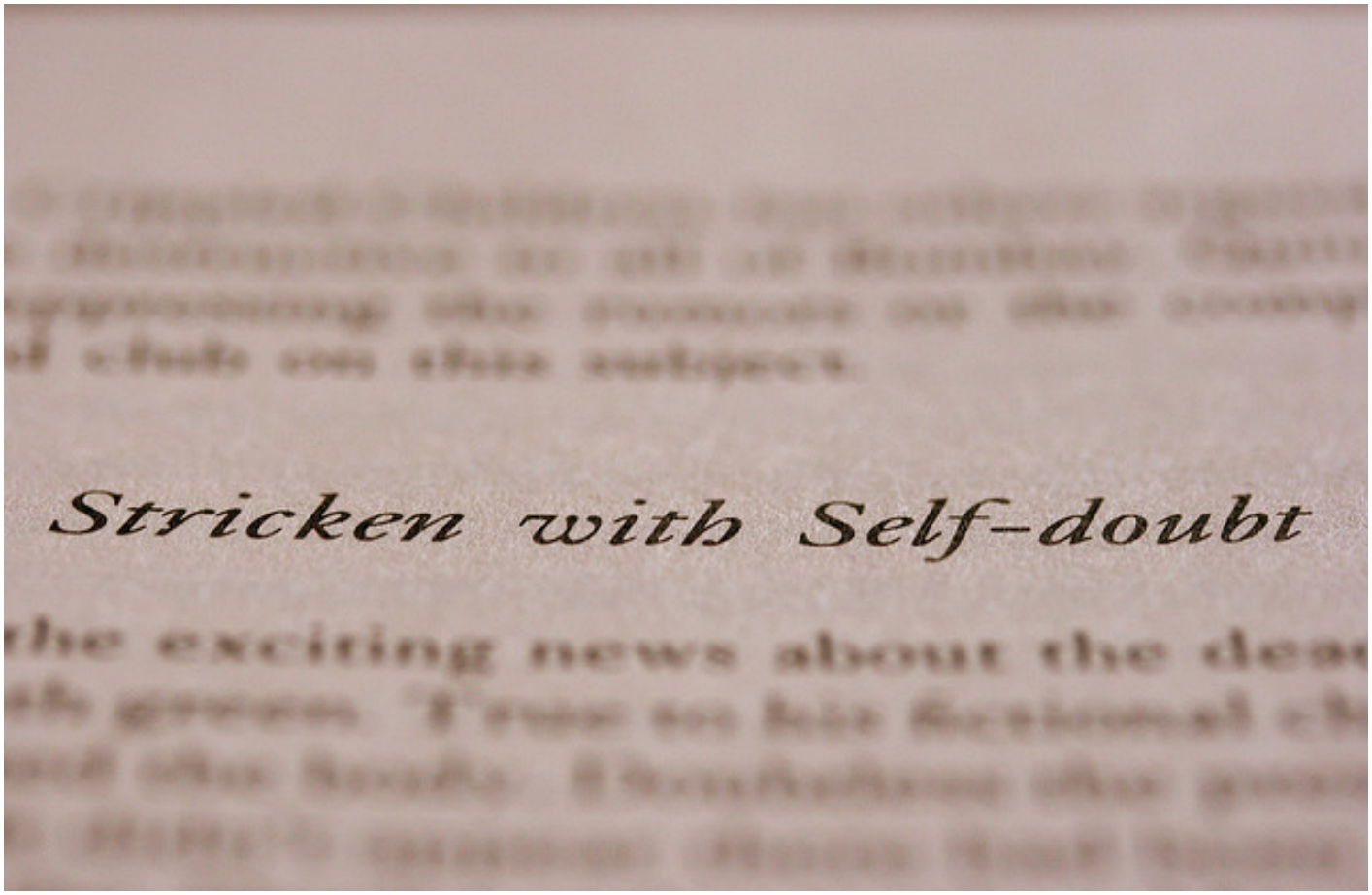
As an adult, I continued to devote myself to listening to students, family, and friends. Submitting my own work felt like a first tentative effort to share my own story, a test of whether or not I should take the risk. So, when I received a rejection, I heard a childhood whisper: *Your story doesn't matter.*

My insecurity isn't every writers', but I believe that for most of us, grief over rejection does not just exist in the present. It echoes some past exclusion or unveils fears about the future. For me, the mere recognition of this childhood belief and its source helped to strip it of most of its power.

After a long year, in addition to all the form letters that flooded in, I began to receive personalized rejections. Then some you-almost-made-its. Finally, acceptances from journals I admired.

When I receive a rejection now, I still feel a range of emotions—twinges of annoyance, discouragement, or doubt—but nothing close to my earlier bouts of debilitating sadness. I've poked around in my messy past. I understand more clearly what the process requires (see the following sidebar, “How to Cope With Rejections”). I'm taking myself more and less seriously. Today, at least, these little truths are enough to nudge me to my red desk—and to keep me working.

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[5]

How to Cope With Rejections

Along the way, a few practical work strategies have helped me weather my internal distractions. The turning point came when I heard a program on public radio about how to find work in a slumping economy. The show profiled a man who committed eight hours a day to finding work, blasting out hundreds of resumes a week.

Strategy 1: Fake It Till You Make It

When I was honest with myself, I recognized I was ambivalent about publishing. I believed, under some karmic law, that focusing on my own desires would ensure my failure: *You are trying to get attention, prove your worth.* No reasonable counterargument—*publishing is a brave and generous way to participate in the cultural dialogue*—could stop my fear that I was self-centered.

Because I couldn't come up with a good answer for why I should publish, I decided to ignore the question. Instead, I faked it: I pretended to be a healthy writer. I acted as if submissions were an undramatic part of the writing process and hunkered down at my desk no matter how aggressively my negative thoughts pounded. The work endured, while the internal distractions eased from a roar to gentle lapping.

Strategy 2: Set Aside One Day a Week for Business

One of my former mentors, poet and memoirist Peggy Schumaker, sets aside a day a week for the business side of writing. I imitated her, and the compartmentalization helped. My creative mind attended to writing, my business mind

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focused on submissions—and my emotions had less room to weasel into either.

Strategy 3: Commit to a Ridiculous Number of Submissions

Here's the common wisdom: Research the markets and blast your work to dozens and dozens of possibilities, expecting vast numbers of rejections. At first, I rebelled. I'd navigated my life—jobs, moves, choices for higher education—not by research, but by intuition and with great success. Why not use that strategy to decide where to send my essays?

Because my approach bombed. If I wanted to be published, I soon realized that I had to commit to a ridiculous number of submissions. So, I signed up for list-servs and created spread sheets in which I track markets. I began to regularly check relevant websites and blogs, read new essays I admire, and note who is publishing whom. Now I receive more rejections than ever, but enough happy acceptances to bolster my courage and to energize my work.

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Tarn Wilson's essays appear in *Brevity, Defunct, Gulf Stream, Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Inertia, Ruminate, South Loop Review,* and *The Sun,* among others. She is a graduate of the Rainier Writing Workshop and lives and teaches in the San Francisco Bay Area.

For more information, see Tarn Wilson's website. [6]

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