



Solo Show

22: Five Lessons About Writing and Life (From Santa Claus)

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hey there, and welcome to DIY MFA Radio, Episode Number 22. Today's show notes will be at diymfa.com/022, because it's Episode 22. And this is our very special Holiday Episode since it is the end of the year, and the holiday season, and all that good stuff. Today I wanted to talk a little bit about the Santa Claus myth, and what that has taught me as a writer.

I was thinking about this the other day, and there are actually a number of reasons why being Santa Claus and being a writer are very similar. You're making stuff. In the case of Santa, you're making toys. In the case of a writer, you're making stories. There's a certain whimsy, a certain magic, to both the writing process and to the Santa Claus story.

But I've also noticed that certain elements of the creative process, both for Santa Claus and for the average writer, tend to go hand-in-hand. They tend to be very similar. Let me dive in and tell you about the five main things that I have learned from Santa Claus that have informed and helped me improve my creative process.

Number one, you want to isolate yourself. There's a reason that Santa lives on the North Pole, it's flipping isolated up there. He's all by himself, except for the elves and the reindeer and his Mrs. Santa. But other than that, there's nobody else there. So there's nothing to distract him from his personal mission, which is to make tons and tons of toys for all the good little boys and girls in the world.

There's all this talk about how you need to build your community; and DIY MFA talks a lot about community and why you want to connect with other writers, and with readers, and all that good stuff. But you need to know when it's time to close the door and really focus inwardly so that you can get the writing done; and then when it's time to open that door and let other people into your process.

You really need to test out what works for you, and the best way to do it. When it comes to my own creative process, I tend to work best when I close the door to the outside world and really isolate myself, at least when I'm trying to crank out a lot of raw material really fast. That means usually going to a coffee shop, putting headphones on, and just hammering away at a draft.

I'm not really going to be asking for a lot of outside feedback. I'm not going to be sharing it with readers, at least, not at first. And then once I kind of feel like I've got the foundation of my story, that's when I open the door and I let other writers into the process and other readers into the process. Writing tip number one, isolate yourself when you need to be isolated.



Remember, Santa doesn't spend all his time in the North Pole. He does fly around with his reindeer and deal with civilization, at least once a year. So, tip number two, you want to surround yourself with good people. In Santa's case, those are the elves, and let's face it, these elves are unbelievable.

They can make smartphones all by themselves, like out of wood and paper clips or something. They're like the MacGyvers of the toy industry. So, when it comes to writing a book or writing anything or creating anything, you really need to have good people in your corner.

It's important to find good people, both who will support you and people who are better than you at things that you're not particularly good at, or things you don't really want to do. In that case, it means knowing how to delegate certain elements of the writing process, or of the editing or the promotional process so that you are not having to be pulled in all directions.

This is especially important if you happen to be self-publishing or a hybrid author who self-publishes or publishes traditionally. You want to make sure that the people who are doing the heavy-lifting for areas that are not your specialty, that those people really are good at that particular job. For me, the big game-changer was when I decided to have a web team build the DIY MFA website.

This happened back in 2012, and I decided to delegate the building of the website. Up until then, I had been kind of cobbling it together on my own. I got the theme built, but I was basically doing most of the WordPress, working behind the scenes. But eventually, I realized that my expertise stopped, and I needed to hand it off to someone else to make something really magical.

And so it's important to understand that you are not expected to do everything in the process; and you need to find people who are good at the things that you're not good at. Tip number three, you need to do it for love. Let's think about this for a minute. How thankless is Santa's job?

He makes all these toys, he buys all the raw materials, puts in all the labor or pays for all the labor, goes around, delivers it to all of these kids in one night; and then the kids wake up the next morning, go, "Gee, thanks, mom and dad. I love the toy. Love the smartphone." Like seriously? Poor Santa, right? So, you got to think about writing in these terms.

Ultimately, if you don't love it, you can't do it. If you're in it for the glory or the gold, I hate to break it to you, but there's not a whole lot of glory and gold to be found in writing. But if you do it for love, then the glory and the gold don't matter so much. And ultimately, the big win is having this book that you created, being able to look at something, and say, "Hey, look, I wrote that."

You need to do it for love because then being able to say, "I wrote that," is enough, and that'll give you the satisfaction that you want. If you're in it to write the next Harry Potter or be the next Stephen King, well, you might do that—and if so, that's fantastic and I'm super happy for you. But the odds of that happening...Let's just say the odds might not be in all of our favors.

Okay, number four, sometimes you have to be a little bit in denial. This is the flip side for doing it for love. On one hand, you need to do it for love. You need to be realistic that you're not going to become a bazillionaire from being a writer, unless they decide to make a theme park out of your book. But unless you're like that 1% or point something percent of writers, probably not going to happen.



On the other hand, though, you have to believe in your heart of hearts that someday they might make a theme park out of your book because it's holding out that hope and believing that these magical things are possible, that's what keeps driving you forward. That's what's going to help you cross the finish line.

Think about this in terms of Santa Claus. Santa Claus is a pretty optimistic guy. First of all, he figures that he can fly around the world and deliver toys to all the children and do it all in one night. I mean, I used to try to figure this out when I was a kid, but even if the time zones work in his favor, it's still one hell of a job. So, anyway, a little bit of denial there in Santa's case, and he manages to do it.

Another little piece of denial, is "I will fit down that very narrow chimney, even though I've had way too much milk and cookies in the last 12 hours." Santa has a little bit of denial here, and I have to say, I experienced this myself, that at some point you need to be able to believe that magic is possible; that your book will get out there, that you will make it happen. And sometimes being too steeped in reality can be problematic because then it makes you less hopeful. It makes you less optimistic.

An example for my own life. At one point, I was an intern in a literary agency; and I absolutely loved the work. But at the end of the semester, they asked me if I wanted to stay on and do another term and keep interning there. I remember thinking about it. And I said, no, even though I've really loved it there.

And the reason that I did that was because I knew that if I stayed in that world, if I stayed every day, reading query letters that were probably a whole lot better than my query letter would ever be, but still having to send them a rejection; if I was in that world, and I was seeing that reality of what happens in publishing every single day, then I wouldn't be able to hold out that hope. I wouldn't be able to have just that little bit of denial that was going to get me to the point where I could actually get my book published.

So, that's when I realized I had to, at least for a time, say my goodbyes. And then eventually, actually the happy ending to that story is that I ended up reconnecting with one of the agents who I worked very closely with at that agency; and now, he's my agent. So, at the end of the day, it actually worked out really well.

But again, you want to remember that while a good dose of reality is important, you want to have just that little edge of hope so that it keeps pushing you forward.

The fifth tip from Santa is that after a long day's work, you have to have some milk and cookies. You got to carve out some time to give yourself whatever the equivalent of milk and cookies is in your world.

In my world, that happens to be curling up on my couch with my kitty cat and doing some knitting, and just kind of zoning out for a little bit. It helps me recharge. It helps me reset my brain, so that the next day when I sit down to that computer, I'm not completely overwhelmed with work and writing and being a mom and all that other crazy stuff.

You want to remember that while you're doing it for love, you can't just write, write, write, write, write all the time, because then you're going to burn yourself out. Remember to take some time, remember to take good care of yourself, celebrate your wins. When you hit a milestone,



no matter small, give yourself the equivalent of milk and cookies.

You know, Santa, when he finishes a delivery, he gives himself milk and cookies after each house that he goes to. He celebrates every single little win; house to house, Christmas tree to Christmas tree, stocking to stocking; he celebrates them all.

Now, let me switch gears a little bit because sometimes Santa doesn't always give you what you want. From time to time, even if you're on the nice list, you might actually find yourself with coal in your stocking. I want you to remember two important things about coal.

First, you use coal to make fire. Whenever you get coal in your stocking, whenever something doesn't quite go your way—you get a rejection, things don't work out, your book gets a bad review, what have you—remember you use coal to make fire. Don't dwell on the pain from the rejection or from whatever setback you're having.

Focus on how you can light that fire and use that coal to fuel you, to move you forward so that you can then hit the ground running, try again, and really make it happen next time.

The second thing you want to remember is that coal is exactly the same as a diamond, only it's less sparkly and less organized. Coal is basically carbon atoms all mishmashed together. And a diamond is the carbon atoms, but they're all stacked neatly and in a crystalline form. That's what makes the diamond sparkly because the carbon atoms are all stacked up neatly, and that then reflects the light and refracts it and makes the diamond have this beautiful sparkle to it. The key here is to remember that when you get a lump of coal in your stocking, it might actually be at its core exactly like a diamond. It's just in the rough.

Don't worry so much about each individual setback, each individual rejection or problem. Remember that you can use that setback to start a fire, and to motivate yourself to do something even better.

And that setback, in and of itself, might actually have some sparkle to it, might actually have a hidden gem in there, something that you can then tweak and all you have to do is re-adjust those carbon atoms, and all of a sudden—poof!—you've got this amazing diamond.

Remember that you are not always going to get what you want from Santa or from writing or from life, but ultimately, it is what you need in that moment. Just focus on continuing to write, keep coming back to the page; and if all else fails, have some milk and cookies.

That's about it for my Holiday Writing Tips. I just wanted to wish all my listeners an absolutely magical, wonderful festive holiday season. And I hope that 2015 is a wonderful, wonderful year for you; and that you can make your goals and dreams happen.

Season's Greetings to all; and to all, a good write.

