

Live Like a Movie Star

By Deborah Grayson Riegel, MSW, ACC

When I'm not pouring over the latest business books or the Wall Street Journal, you might find me, upon occasion, flipping through an issue of Entertainment Weekly magazine for alternative inspiration. Truth be told, EW wins out 99.9% of the time, as it fits perfectly on my treadmill's magazine rack.

I found particular meaning among the pages of EW in recent the stories of actors Natalie Portman, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Mark Wahlberg. Each of these business gurus – excuse me, movie actors – took on a role that required them to showcase a new skill set that they didn't have before filming their movies. In the article, each actor spoke about how they transformed themselves from a novice to a skilled, credible character, reminding me about the level of commitment that any metamorphosis requires.

Let's start with Natalie Portman, since she is a graduate of the same elementary school that my kids attend (isn't that reason enough?). For her role as a prima ballerina in the haunting "Black Swan," she spent a year studying ballet with top teachers, went to sleep early each night and altered her diet dramatically. "She really lived the life of a dancer," her ballet coach reported. And having seen the movie its opening weekend (as research for this article, of course), I can attest to the veracity of her performance. Kudos, Natalie!

For her movie, "Country Strong," Gwyneth Paltrow went from not even knowing how to hold a guitar (which worries me about the state of her marriage, since her husband is Cold Play lead singer and guitarist Chris Martin) to performing live this past November at the Country Music Awards. She took ongoing lessons with a professional guitarist, suffering through hand "cramping and bleeding." But as she contends in the article, "faking it is just not my style."

This brings me to Mark Wahlberg, who spent four years learning to how to box, and maintaining his skills, while his movie project, "The Fighter," fought casting and financing challenges. What motivated him to maintain his training regimen over the years? In Wahlberg's words, "I wanted to look like a world-class boxer, not just like some actor who can box pretty good."

In each of these cases, the actors mastered a new character by eating, sleeping and breathing the part they were paid to play. I would, too, if someone were paying me a few million bucks to learn to dance, strum or box. But what about the rest of us who want to take on a new challenge, ability or frame of mind that isn't being bankrolled by box office giants?

I had the opportunity to mull this over a few weeks ago after I submitted a recent article to a New York periodical where I write a bi-weekly column. My eagle-eyed editor suggested that my articles were expanding in length, which has the inverse effect of shrinking readers' attention spans. Could I please keep my articles to 1100 words or fewer, he requested. I realized that this would require me not just to write, but to edit, re-write, and polish some more. That's what a professional writer does, I thought, not me.

My immediate reflex was that I shouldn't be bound by such stringent rules and regulations because "I'm not really a writer." I don't have formal writing training, I didn't major in Journalism, and on no standardized forms where it asks for my profession do I jot down, "writer." As I wallowed in my self-serving excuse for why I shouldn't be held to the laws of good journalism, I realized that I was not just being stubborn and lazy, I was being insulting.

I was insulting the periodical that is willing to publish whatever thoughts I have rolling around in my head that week by regarding myself as less than a professional writer. I was insulting my readers by implying that they have the time to read stuff written by a phony. And I was insulting myself by discounting the hours, passion and energy that I put into producing a new article every two weeks.

And so I asked myself, "what would a professional writer do?" A professional writer would take direction from her editor, and commit to the entire writing process, which includes editing out self-serving, redundant, or unnecessary content. A professional writer would set a time to write and stick to it, without the distractions of email, the Today Show, or, heaven help her, a new issue of Entertainment Weekly waiting to be read. And a professional writer – especially one who wants to have a book contract in 2011 (there, I said it) – would find a way to write almost every single day.

This year, I am going to live like a movie star...I mean, a professional writer. In order for me to transform myself from a kinda/sorta/whatever writer into an author, I need to follow the wisdom of our sages, Portman, Paltrow and Wahlberg, and commit to the attitudes, behaviors and choices of the "real thing". But for me as a writer, and for you as you commit to developing whatever skill or aptitude is burning for you, this isn't play acting. This is real life. And we will get out of it what we put into it.

If you want to move into management, adopt the manager mindset now. If you want to become an athlete, move more now. If you want to be a more committed philanthropist, give more now. If you want to be a better parent or partner, make your promise and play that part now.

In the brilliant play and film "The Miracle Worker," which told the true story of Helen Keller's relationship with her remarkable teacher Annie Sullivan, Helen's father and Annie have a heated exchange about the extraordinary expectations that Helen's teacher holds for her. Annie asserts, "I treat

her as a sighted child because I ask her to see... I expect her to see!" Annie expects Helen to stretch beyond any limitations she has, and act as if she were capable of anything. As we know, Helen went on to live a remarkable life as an author, political activist, and lecturer. Not a remarkable life for someone who was deaf and blind – a remarkable life, period.

Who will you become this year? And how will you act “as if” you are already there, even while you are on the journey?

While I have plenty more to say on this topic, as a writer, I’m wrapping up here at word 1,092.