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What If the Impossible Were Possible?

by Dr. Doreen Stern



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How often do you let someone else's words deflate you?

- "That won't work here," your boss says.
- "You'll never be able to pull that off," your spouse chimes in.
- "That's a stupid idea," your kid concludes.

How frequently do you quash one of your own brilliant ideas with these deadly words: "It's impossible," telling yourself you don't have the time, the energy or the expertise to pull off such a stunning coup?

What if I told you the impossible IS possible? That every day unlikely events occur.

Of course, as an actuary, you're concerned with calculating risk, not the possibility of the unlikely happening. Do you yearn to live exactly at the mean, though? Or to be an outlier? Someone who lives an extraordinary life? Because you pay attention to your dreams?

Here's an example: As I was preparing to leave my writing group this past Monday, one of my colleagues—an excellent writer with a compelling story—murmured, "It's so hard to get published today. Even if I finish my book, there are thousands of other people trying to get published, too. And so few publishing houses. Each publishes only about 25 books a year."

Susan's meaning was clear: "Things are hopeless, so why keep trying?"

I sat back down and suggested to her that she think more positively. And then related the following story, which I heard a writer describe in a presentation: The author wanted to get his book in front of a certain editor so he dressed up as a FED EX driver and delivered his book to the publishing house. "Express Delivery for Jane Smith," he announced to the guard at the front desk.

"Leave the package here," the guard replied, pointing to his desk.

"I've been directed to surrender this package only to the editor herself," the writer shot back.

It was only when the writer saw the whites of the editor's eyes that he came clean with his ruse. With a big smile and a humble bow. "Please consider my work," he asked her.

The editor did indeed read the writer's book—and then signed him to a book contract.

An unlikely story, right? Yet, that very night when I got home, I opened *The New York Times* to discover an even more improbable one.

The former drummer of a rock band had just been awarded the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. "I feel like I'm in a fairytale," author Paul Harding revealed. "It was so unlikely. A small press published my debut novel, *Tinkers*. There was no marketing campaign. Only 7,000 copies of the book were sold by independent booksellers. One book at a time. I received a \$1,000 advance, which I was delighted to get. I never expected my book to be published at all."

Harding's manuscript had languished in a desk drawer for nearly three years, after a series of agents and publishers had rejected it.

Tinkers is the story of a New England man who's on his deathbed: as he's dying he recalls his childhood and memories of his father.

"It's an interior story, quiet in the tradition of transcendental writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau," Harding explains. Agents and publishing houses rejected it because of its slow, contemplative nature. "Who wants to read books like that today?" they demanded.

Eventually Harding screwed up the courage to send out his book to another publisher. “I think your book is quite good,” the publisher said, “but it doesn’t fit within our offerings. I’m having dinner tomorrow night with the editor of a new imprint at NYU. Do you mind if I mention your book to him?”

The rest is history.

History was made because of the unflagging support of a group of zealots: independent bookstore owners and employees who embraced the book. Folks like Michele Filgate, the events manager at RiverRun Bookstore in Portsmouth, N.H., who raved about

Tinkers on “Bookslut,” a literary blog. And she mentioned the book to Rebecca Pepper Sinkler, the chairwoman of the Pulitzer fiction jury, at a book reviewing workshop in Manchester, N.H.

Here’s my parting salvo: The impossible becomes possible every day of the year if you live your life as if miracles exist; if you listen to your dreams and take small steps toward them. Steps so small you can’t fail. Tiny steps like sending out your manuscript to ONE MORE publisher. Even though all the other ones rejected it.

What tiny step will YOU take today? ●

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