

How To Think Sideways: Career Survival School for Writers

[By Holly Lisle](#)

Introduction

Before you start a new project, you have to make sure you have space to work on it. This week, you're going to be creating space. If you're building a house, you clear the land. If you're writing a book, you clean off your desk, set up a fresh, empty document, open a new notebook, or put in a clean sheet of paper into your typewriter. (I'm trying to hit all the bases here.)

The project you're starting today, however, doesn't require physical reorganization. You're getting ready to start thinking sideways, so you need to clear out the clutter from years of, well... NOT thinking sideways.

That's your task this week. I promise you it will be a lot less painful than cleaning out an attic or garage before you get ready to sell your house. It might, however, be tougher than cleaning off your desk. Not MY desk. Mine's a disaster right now because I'm mid-project. But YOUR desk.

Ready?

Let's get started.

The 15-Man Stake-Out

December, 1994. I was sitting in a police interrogation room in the Fayetteville police station in North Carolina, in the middle of the most tumultuous few months of my life. My son and daughter, then 9 and 11 years old, sat opposite me. They

huddled on the bench facing me, scared and very small.

Earlier that day, two police detectives had stopped by our apartment, looking for anyone in the area who had a computer/printer setup. Well, in the living room, I had two enormous computers plus a laptop, an industrial laser printer... and two children I'd allowed to use my computer for games and artwork when I wasn't working.

Turns out they'd decided to play cops and criminals, and had typed out (in pretty bad kid typing) a message that someone was going to be murdered at the Cross Creek Mall on a certain day, at a certain time. They then planted this note in the shrubs and went on with their game of detecting the evildoer.

They LEFT the note in the shrubs, though. And a neighbor from somewhere across the big greensward found it, panicked, showed it around, took it into the police – and the Fayetteville police set up 15 plainclothes detectives to stake out the Cross Creek Mall – during the height of the Christmas shopping season – to try to find one lunatic with a gun bent on murder.

At any other time, it would have been no big deal. It might even have been funny. But in early September, my son had come to me to tell me that his father had been molesting him when he and his sister were over at their father's house. In the period since then, I'd discovered that my ex had been abusing our daughter and that he'd left her alone in the house (she was six through ten years old) without supervision while he took our son away for the whole day or more. We had gone from being a family with two sets of in-town grandparents, bunches of uncles and aunts, and friends, to being pariahs.

My folks said my son was lying; the ex's folks supported their son the molester; the word of what their father had done to them got out and the kids my children went to school with made their lives hell. My folks moved away without saying goodbye to anyone or letting us know they were leaving – or even

leaving their address; my then-nine-year-old son made a suicide gesture that landed him in the hospital for a while; we moved to an apartment 50 miles away to be close to him; my daughter got hit by a car while playing where she wasn't supposed to; and our constant trips to and from the police station – while the kids gave evidence, while the ex confessed, while I paid for the house I was trying to sell and the apartment we were renting, while the money ran thin, while I took the kids to a therapist we couldn't afford and the ex wouldn't pay for, while my second marriage hit shoals – all of this left us ragged. Ah, yes. Both my son and I were taking Prozac at the time, and I discovered that I can't write while taking Prozac. So I had a writing deadline that was approaching, and no words to meet it.

We were in real trouble. My daughter was acting out, my son was clinically depressed, I was clinically depressed, and our world had turned into one giant pity pool in which we were drowning, and where we were being encouraged to keep drowning by all the people who were dealing with us and feeling sorry for us and telling us that we had every right to feel sorry for ourselves – cops, therapists, social service workers, doctors, nurses...

Self-pity was making both kids impossible to deal with. It wasn't doing anything great for me, either.

Sitting in that interrogation room, I was scared. The kids had just been playing a game, and their little note was neither malicious nor left intentionally – but we were in real trouble, and they'd done other things that WERE potentially devastating if they didn't turn their lives around. When the detectives came to our door and discovered my two little culprits, life dealt me a new card. One card to play – a really good, really big one. Neither kid had been hearing me unless I was saying something they wanted to hear. I wasn't getting through.

But having two detectives drop by the house and tell the three of you that you have to follow them to the police station will get your attention. It sure got ours. I realized in one moment of heartbreaking clarity that I had been given an opportunity. In that moment when circumstances forced all three of us to snap out of our self-pity and see the direct line between actions and consequences, I realized that I had to wake up and be a mom, because for just those few moments, the two of them were listening to me as if their lives depended on it.

So I sat in that little gray room, studying them out of the corner of my eye while I filled out forms, refusing to let them talk to each other. They sat at one end of the opposite bench, huddled together, watching me like two baby chicks in front of an approaching fox. Silence is a mother's great friend – it forces attention, it heightens tension. And it allows you to think. I maintained silence in the room, and I thought, trying to figure out what to say – searching for words, any words, that could push them to turn themselves around.

You don't realize how small and pitiful and weak words are until you need them most.

"You've been through terrible things," I finally said to both of them. "Awful things. But those things aren't happening anymore, and they aren't ever going to happen again. Your father will have to go through me to get to you, and he won't get through me."

They sat there, watching me.

"But just because awful things happened to you, that's no excuse for what you did. That's no excuse for the way you behaved. You didn't think of the consequences of leaving a note like that outside. You didn't consider that you would frighten people. Yes, bad things happened to you, but that doesn't make it okay for you to do things that hurt anyone

else.

"I guarantee you that outside of these doors, there are men who had the same things happen to them that happened to you. They were abused too. They were molested too. And some of them are cops, and some of them are behind bars. Some of those people decided to take what happened to them and make sure that it didn't happen to anyone else. They're heroes. They decided to take something bad and turn it into something good. Some of those people, though, decided to feel sorry for themselves and used it as an excuse for doing bad things to other people.

"Bad things happen to everyone. And everyone has a choice whether to use those things to make them stronger, or to use those things as an excuse to do what's wrong. **You have a choice,"** I said.

I built on this, I expounded, I used examples of the men who had put their lives on the line to step into a crowded mall believing someone was there looking for a stranger to kill, and being willing to step between that killer and his potential victims. I pointed out that the two of them had caused this. They cried. I got a little choked up. I went every which way around the theme that actions have consequences. That what they had done would have consequences.

It was a long talk, it was without a doubt **the** best lecture I ever gave as a mom, and you know what? Though I know without doubt that they heard me then, neither one of them remembers a word of what I said today, though they certainly remember the circumstances that led up to it.

That's all right. The person who most needed to hear what I had to say heard it and remembers the better part of that speech in vivid detail.

That person was me.

I mentioned our sad little pity party. Sitting there in that interrogation room, I heard myself talking about my kids and their self-pity and the excuses they were making for the things they did, and I realized I was doing the same thing. I was making excuses for them. And I was making excuses for me.

I had found the role of the victim, and had discovered that victims get lots of pity, and I hadn't kicked myself out of that mindset. I had, instead, settled in. I spread the pity downward, making excuses for both kids, too. Poor little things – they'd had it so hard. So **of course** they were making excuses for themselves. I was the example they had.

I'd love to say that was the moment when everything turned around for us, but it wasn't. We still had another six or so months of intermittent and variegated hell to get through, where we bought a house, my second husband and I split up, I lost the house, we moved into a motel for a month, and we went flat broke and stayed that way for about a year as I struggled to get my writing back. There were also a few minor goodies tossed in there for grins and giggles and sheer unrelenting terror.

But if that evening in the interrogation room wasn't the end of the rain of crap, it was the night I began straightening my spine and standing up again, and being the mom my kids needed, and not just another fellow victim drowning right along with them in the pity pool. I changed. And because I changed, I could help them change.

The monster confessed to his crimes, first to social services, and then in court. He was convicted of several felonies, plea-bargained down from much, much bigger felonies to avoid a trial.

That nine-year-old boy served in the Air Force for seven years, got out, and made a life for himself. He's a dad, he writes stories and he's working toward publication, and I

believe in him. That eleven-year-old girl is now married and writing full time both under her own name and with a pseudonym.

Both kids grew up to be great adults. Most of it is due to the daily choice each made to not be a victim, to not be a 'survivor' – which is another label that lets people keep reminding themselves that they were once victims, and to keep the pity party rolling – and chose to just be themselves.

Some of it, I like to think, is because I was their mom, and I did everything in my power to show them – not tell them, but show them – that they could make their lives into the lives they wanted.

Now, why this matters to you...

The Application

You need to know where I'm coming from to understand that when I tell you I started out with all four mindsets that keep people from succeeding, and I successfully broke all four, I did not have small barriers to overcome. I had big ones. If I could do this, you can do this, no matter how big your own barriers are.

And you must. I did not succeed in my career until I had broken all four crippling mindsets.

Each mindset is represented by a single word. The story above is one of my several personal examples of VICTIM that I had to overcome.

The scary part about this, though, is that ALL FOUR Thinking Barriers are not only common... they're pervasive. They are often popular, and frequently we are **encouraged** to adopt them because doing so benefits others, **though it never benefits us.**

One more time on that because this is where the process of making your dreams real either starts or dies:

Remember:

Adopting The Four Thinking Barriers FREQUENTLY benefits others, and NEVER benefits us.

I'm going to give you four lines to memorize. These are The Four THINKING Barriers.

(continued in the class)

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