

In Search of Impossible Goodness

By Holly Lisle

I wrote this article somewhere around 1998 or 1999.

All the tech in it has vanished from the face of the earth along with the companies who offered it. But the principles remain the same. – Holly

To the best of my knowledge and remembrance, I have never before found inspiration for my writing in the work of a corporate entity. Which only goes to show that nothing is impossible. This is the story of how I found Impossible Goodness – the highest level of success – in a most unlikely place, as well as an exploration of how we define the level of success we achieve, in writing and elsewhere, by our expectations and our daily choices.

In every aspect of life, we see other people in the act of doing things right, and from our interactions with them, we develop our own feel for how we can do things right ourselves – we build templates for our personal lives, our work lives, our goals, and our writing.

I'm not going to address the examples we get from those who do things wrong. We gain valuable experiences in dealing with everything from unpleasant incompetence to complete failure. But it is in our dealings with success that we stand the most chance of either emulating compromise or reaching for

excellence – so I'd like to look at the three levels of success, and what each of them means to us.

I define the three levels of success as:

1. **Professional & Competent**
2. **Excellent & Surprising**
3. **Impossibly Good**

In academic terms, all three of these conditions would look the same; they would all be "A"-level work. This provides another example of how the real world and the academic world have little connection. Because in real terms, these three levels of success are light years apart.

Back in 1993, I bought a Micron computer. It was a good computer – so good, in fact, that it only reached retirement this year, in spite of being seriously obsolete a few years before that. It did what I needed it to do. I had some problems with it initially, waited on the usual tech phone lines, got the usual mix of helpful, knowledgeable techs and evil spawn-of-Satan techs. The product was solid, however, and I eventually got everything working the way it should with only a moderate financial outlay and delays I found tolerable. Everything about Micron was good enough. Not breathtaking, not wonderful – but I'd own another Micron. My experience with Micron lets me classify them as Professional & Competent.

Professional & Competent is getting the job done to the level that any other professional, facing the same financial and time constraints that you face, would manage. Professional & Competent work will keep you in business year in and year out – you'll win customers, readers, etc., at a faster rate than you'll lose them. It's good enough.

The same year, I bought a laptop from Sager. I was doing a lot of convention and conference appearances at the time, and wanted to be able to work on the road. The Sager folks were great, and when I developed a system problem that they

couldn't resolve over the phone, I sent the system in, and got it back improved. Along with the required work, they did a couple of upgrades for free. I paid my own shipping to them, but they covered the shipping back, they did the repairs in less time than the estimate that they gave me, and they were prompt, universally courteous. Along with having a good product, they threw in added value.

I found Sager Excellent & Surprising.

Excellent & Surprising is going beyond what you have to do – adding a bit of yourself, a little more than what was asked for or even required, simply because you care about the quality of what you do. Excellent & Surprising work will win you some awards, gain you some really ecstatic fans, and allow you to stand above the crowd of qualified professionals as being better.

And then we come to Impossibly Good. I always considered the existence of an Impossibly Good tech company . . . well, impossible. I considered Impossible Goodness something only attainable within the realm of individual achievement, and utterly beyond the reach of the bureaucracies of corporate culture.

Then my Visor Deluxe developed a strange hardware glitch. With the usual fear and loathing that any technophile feels when facing the prospect of telephone tech support (“This is going to be expensive”, “This is going to take FOREVER”, “How long WILL I have to listen to ‘Your call is important to us; please stay on the line?’”) I got the tech support number from the Handspring website, double-checked the FAQs to make sure I wasn't overlooking anything obvious. And then I called. Braced myself for twenty minutes of Muzak Vivaldi. And was talking with a real live person inside of a minute.

Now here's where we leave the realm of the excellent and move into the realm of the too-good-to-be-believed.

I ran into a problem, and when I called tech support, and explained my problem, and the tech listened to my description of what was going wrong, I got the first huge shock of my technophile life. "Okay," she said, "that sounds like a hardware problem. Here are the steps to take to see if it's fixable." She gave me about three steps. "If that doesn't work, call back, and we'll replace it for free."

Huh? I am rarely speechless. I do words for a living, and I have a large supply in stock. But – what? I was prepared to spend money to get my Visor fixed; I write books, web articles, my daily to-do list, and poetry on it, as well as brainstorming proposals and new projects on the thing. I keep my character, location, and language databases there. Being without it is like being without the most convenient part of my brain. Paying to get it fixed was entirely within what I considered to be reasonable business. But they were willing to send me a free one?

Second shock coming. I took the steps, my problems did not go away, and I called back. The new tech looked up my customer number, said, "Sure. I'm sorry for any inconvenience. We'll send you a free one right away; just save the box and send us your broken one in it." He got my address, gave me a confirmation number, and said, "If your new one isn't there by Friday, call us back with this confirmation number and we'll take care of it." Just like that. They were sending me a free one, and they hadn't even asked to see my old one first. (Yes – I had to give them a credit card number. If you don't return the old one, you WILL pay for the new one. They aren't insane, after all. Just Impossibly Good.)

Third and fourth shocks. The replacement Visor (in my same beautiful happy, sunny orange, no less) arrived the day after I talked with the second tech. Overnight FedEx. With it came paid return FedEx postage. All I had to do was put my old Visor in the box and tape it shut, and drop it off at FedEx. Not only was the replacement Visor free, but so was shipping.

BOTH ways.

Impossible Goodness. It's what you would do if you had no time limits, no financial constraints, no one to tell you that you had to meet certain quotas, or fulfill corporate obligations.

Somehow . . . somehow . . . in a world where all of these things exist, Handspring still manages Impossible Goodness.

So how does this apply to your writing?

You can have a solid, long-term career being Professional & Competent. Most of the writers on the shelves who have been there for ten years or better fall into this range. You like their work, you know that every time you buy one of their books, it will meet most, if not all of your expectations. They don't offer a lot of surprises from book to book, but they don't offer a lot of disappointments, either. They offer good value for money.

You can be a **Professional & Competent**, but to do so, you will have to accept the following compromises:

1. I will do the best I can given the time I have.
2. I will turn in a solid, fully developed story each time, but will do only what I have to do to make it so – I will not expend extra time or effort on an already-acceptable book when I could be using that same time or effort to develop a new book.
3. I will focus on my bottom line, and will accept the fact that not all readers will stay with me – I will satisfy myself with gaining new readers, but losing old ones.
4. I will accept writing at my current level for the rest of my career.

You can – if you're willing to put not just more of your time, but also a part of yourself into each book – add the extra passion and magic that will move you into the realm of the Excellent & Surprising. In that realm, you'll be in some

brehtaking company. J.K. Rowling writes there, and so does Stephen King, and so does Dean Koontz. Each of these writers brings something extra to their work that you cannot find elsewhere, and they've reaped significant rewards for doing so.

Being **Excellent & Surprising** takes more commitment. You have to give yourself the following challenges, and strive with each book to meet them.

1. **I will improve in some way with each story.**
2. **I will reach inside myself and my life and add something from me to each work.**
3. **I will, with every project, strive to give more than I have been paid to give.**
4. **Knowing that every writer loses readers, I will still make it my goal to keep and satisfy every one.**

Excellent & Surprising writers face the same challenges as Professional & Competent ones – deadlines, money problems, readers who come and go. But word of mouth and dedication will keep more of their old readers, will help them carry readers through one or several books where they attempt to do something better but fail, and will bring them new readers at a steady rate, because they are always fighting to be better. Everyone, unfortunately, writes books that some readers don't like. Everyone occasionally flops. But the Excellent and Surprising writer will weather those flops better than the Professional & Competent one.

Finally, **Impossible Goodness** can be the goal upon which you set your sights.

The only way to reach Impossible Goodness is to refuse to be stymied by the obstacles of real life. Live in the realm of the Excellent & Surprising, strive always to be better, to learn more, to challenge your own expectations as much as your readers, and you may find when you have finished that one of

your stories, or several, or many, have transcended the realm of the Excellent & Surprising, and have touched Impossible Goodness. **Impossible Goodness takes constant commitment, no small degree of faith, and just a touch of grace.**

You cannot live at this heights forever, but like Mary Lou Retton with her string of perfect tens, like Theodore Sturgeon with **Godbody** and **Slow Sculpture** and **The Dreaming Jewels**, and, weirdly enough, like Handspring with product development and now, with customer service, you can hit these heights for a moment, and in doing so change the way that people see the world that surrounds them, and the way they understand the possibilities that exist within that world. You'll raise the bar by proving that what seemed impossible *wasn't*, at least for one brief, shining moment. And you'll leave a star behind you to guide and inspire the next traveler who shares the path that you have traveled.

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.

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