

Caroline Paul on writing tips learned through adventure

“I did this with many of my adventures. I learned something the hard way and remembered that experience when I was writing books. Maybe because adventures are simply stories in action and they provided me with many of the tools that I use as an author. I heard someone define a dramatic narrative as “anticipation mingled with uncertainty”, and that exactly describes adventure.”

When I was young, I had an Olympic dream. Unfortunately, I had absolutely no talent. Is it sounding familiar? So, I made a plan, and that was to train in a sport that was so obscure that very few people were in it; even less people had heard of it and hardly anyone could pronounce it. That sport was luge. For those of you who don't know luge, it's when you're lying a very tiny sled and you hurtle down an ice track feet first wearing a helmet and a skin-typed bodysuit, no brakes, no padding.

How obscure was this sport? At that time, there was only one track in the U.S.A. There were about 40 Americans total doing it. About ten were women. If two people go to the Olympics, then my chances were one in five. And those were pretty good chances. So, I travelled to the only luge track in the U.S.A. and began to learn the sport. And I was terrible at it. How terrible? Well, let's just say that I wanted a cool nickname like “sled dog” or “speedy”. Instead, my nickname was “crash”.

Within a few weeks of being on the track, the National Championship was held. And so, of course, I entered. Unfortunately, when my turn to race came, I did what I always did: I crashed at the very big turn at the end. But the rules were that as long as you were touching your sled across the finish line, you weren't disqualified. So I managed to hang on with my fingertips and slide to a place in history. That place was last, but last here was number eleven. And this was a National Championship. So I got to proudly tell everyone and anyone who would listen that in the whole U.S.A., I was in the top eleven of female lugers.

There are many, many lessons in this story. But I want to apply one in particular to my writing life. In fact, I did this with many of my adventures. I learned something the hard way and remembered that experience when I was writing books. Maybe because adventures are simply stories in action and they provided me with many of the tools that I use as an author. I heard someone define a dramatic narrative as “anticipation mingled with uncertainty”. And that exactly describes adventure. That's how it feels like for me when I stand on the edge of a cliff about to launch my paraglider. That's what you guys felt when you launched your paragliders.

I'll give you three of those tips that I learned through adventure, that have been key for my writing and I hope will be of use to your own creative experience.

What I learned from luge: Find your niche. I know that there are many important things to being a writer: writing a beautiful sentence is the one most people think of; there's also finding a good story, knowing how to research, knowing how to interview. And frankly, I knew when I first started out determined to publish a book and I know now that there were so many amazing writers who can do all those things so much better than me. So I knew that my only chance to glory was not to compete with my fellow authors, but to find the place where no one else was. That only I could fill. In other words, I had to find the equivalent of the sport of luge, but in writing.

So this is why my first published book was a memoir about being a firefighter. At that time, there were books about firefighting and some had been big bestsellers. But there were none from a perspective of a woman, because back in 1998, when my memoir "Fighting Fire" was published there were so few women firefighters. So if there were so few women firefighters, probably even less of them were writers, and I had my first book. And, in fact, my publishing experience was a dream. Sometimes I hate to speak about it to new writers because it was unlike most people's experience of writing. I had very few bad chapters written and then I quickly find an agent and I was told how to go through the writing process to a better version of those bad chapters. And then I was quickly picked up by a New Yorker publisher. And then I was heavily edited by a great editor. And with a lot of her help I produced a pretty darn good book and I got a lot of attention. And it wasn't because I was the best writer in the world. Not at all. It was because I had found a story that no one else could tell.

I had broken into the book business by becoming the writer equivalent of being the number eleven luger in the country. I'd found a space where few people were and I filled it. So it's not good enough to just find an obscure subject. Otherwise, your writer nickname will be "crash". In the end, I did not goaled the Olympic Luge and it wasn't because I wasn't good enough. It was ultimately because I wasn't interested enough. Within a year, I realized that I don't want my life to be conveyed to an ice track. Just as I became a national team member of the U.S.A. I quit.

So make sure you find that space to occupy that really resonates with you. And then hold on tightly with your fingertips until you cross the finish line.

My second tip. Make sure you have good adventure buddies. It's my first big fire as a San Francisco firefighter. I'm kneeling on the stairwell, my heart is racing and my breathing is shallow. Ahead of me is a thick wall of smoke and below me people on the sidewalk are crying and screaming. And I'd been only a few months on the job, I'm what's called a probationer. For short, they call us *probies*. And because I'm so new, I had an officer behind me, also kneeling on the stairwell. And the two of us were about to head to a burning apartment. Back then there was little actual schooling about fires. You just learned on the job. So it's partly the officer's responsibility to look out for the probie on the job, in this case me, and to keep me from killing myself. And today my officer was a man named Lieutenant Colden. I didn't know him very well, he was a firefighter with experience of over twenty years. And as we are about to go on to the

biggest fire I've ever seen, I have to trust him. The smoke is coming up over us and it's getting hot. And Lieutenant yelled something at me. I can't understand him because we both have air masks on, but I knew it's important because, remember, I knew nothing about firefighting. And whatever he is going to tell me has to be important, I need to know what he's saying. So I yelled back: "What? What? What?" and he yelled something at me. And I still can't understand him. And then, he turns around and goes back down the stairs. And he leaves me completely alone. or For a moment, I'm totally shocked. I mean, this doesn't make sense even for someone like me. I know that a fire is ahead of us, so why did he leave? It takes me a few seconds and then I realize: "Oh, this is a test." He is trying to see whether I'll scream and cry and follow him out. Because you see, this is 1989, and all around the U.S.A. women are just beginning to come to fire departments, usually by court order. Here in the U.S.A. I'm in the 15 female firefighters, out of 1,500 men. Almost all those men are not happy that we, women, are there; for many reasons, but the top one is that they just don't believe women are strong enough or brave enough. So there's no way I was going to look like a coward, nor I was going to fall for whatever dirty trick my officer was trying to play to prove women can't do this job.

So I do what a firefighter is supposed to do. I plunge forward into the sick thick smoke and heavy hit it and I began to crawl dragging the holes. And I've got no idea where I am going, I don't know where the fire is, I don't know how to do this, I can't see anything. This is the first surprise of a really good fire, of what you guys would call a very bad fire. It's totally pitch black. It's sort of like having a blanket winded around your head. And I start banging into things, swirling the other way and it's getting hotter and hotter and hotter. And it seems to take years. But I'm sure, it entirely took a minute. And then I feel someone behind me, pulling out my coat and this person, who by the way was not my officer, the guy who left me, pushed me very firmly to the dark. Pretty soon I can see flashes of orange and I realize "Oh, these must be flames" because it looks very different in a really, really bad fire. And then the guy behind me is yelling something, I realize finally me, probie scam, the fifteenth woman in the fire department, future book writer, I open up the nozzle and put water on the fire. So when the smoke cleared, my officer ran up to me and yelled at me. It turns out he wasn't testing me. He was actually trying to tell me that he had forgot his flashlight and was going down to retrieve it. And I was supposed to stay put. Until this day, I don't understand why he needed the flashlight. You could not see in this fire. You can't see in a good fire. I know that he panicked, but he also wasn't testing me.

So the bottom line is: both of us were terrible adventure buddies. He abandoned me on the stairs. And I obviously didn't trust him to begin with because my perspective was so colored by the stress of being one of the few wonder female firefighters. And the only good adventure buddy was that guy in the dark who went to find me by following the halls because he knew I was in there alone.

In my writing life I have made sure that I have really good adventure buddies. Specifically, I belong to a writing community. We call ourselves the Grotto. Without the Grotto I could honestly tell you that I would not have published neither of the four books that I have published

until today. The writing life is dark, there's lots of bumping into walls and losing your way and many people will not believe in you. But the Grotto has never left me on the stairs and it accompanied me all the way through the smoke, through the fire. I want to describe the Grotto to you. I don't think you have a community like this here. I would love to see a Romanian Grotto. Grotto means cave. I looked up the word, *grotă*. I would love to see a *grotă* here in Romania.

In 1994, about 20 years ago, three writers decided they were just tired of writing in their own homes, in their pajamas, while their friends went off to work. They rent a six room-apartment in San Francisco to use exclusively as a work space. They called it the Grotto. Twenty years ago, this was a totally unique idea: a shared workspace for self-employed writers. They are Ethan Canin, Paul Browns and Ethan Watters, maybe you've heard of them. They are all very renowned writers in the U.S.A, but they weren't at that times. They worried that there would be extra rooms they couldn't fill, but in fact writers flocked to this idea. It started with six people and today, over twenty years later, we have eighty people in our current writer space. The Grotto looks like an office space: there's a common kitchen, a large lunch room, we have a library where people can hold meetings, with bookshelves with hundreds of books that have been published by the Grotto residents.

But the Grotto is more than just desks. The thing about being a writer in the U.S.A. is that we all know that we can write for free at home or at a cafe. We're willing to pay rent in order to be in proximity with other writers because there is a great power in a group of narratives artists. Some of it seems practical, some of it seems quite magical. On the practical side, when you get a group of people together, we share information about our trade, we have a common email list, we ask questions about advances, about difficult editors. We form groups. Within the Grotto, we have groups of twenty people, journalists getting together to learn how to do pitch sessions; currently we have six people about to publish books. So they all get together, help each other, do marketing.

The Grotto is more than just office space. It's more than what we call in San Francisco co-working space. Do you guys have that here? Do you have the hub here, right? I love the hub, we have in San Francisco two. But the hub is all about having a place to work. I would say that the Grotto goes one step further and it's really a community. Being a minority in the fire department, I'm weary of large groups. Because they can split you off into distinct tribes, a majority can bully a minority or they can fall under the swear of just one personality. And it's enough of a risk that many of us might decide "I don't want to belong to a group of people" because we don't want anything to get in the way of our creativity. And what can create more of a mess than human relationships? But, the thing about the Grotto is we've avoided that. We are eighty people now and I think the reason we've avoided that is because we have one strong belief. It's the certainty that there is enough out there for everyone. We say *a rising tide lifts all boats*. Do you know guys what is it? The idea that: if I support somebody else that helps me. There's enough out there for everyone. At the Grotto we discourage competition with one another. Of course,

we're humans and we can feel envious or we can feel mad at ourselves for failing. But we don't talk about it in the halls. It's really frowned upon to talk badly about anybody else at the Grotto.

And this is why I believe the writers in the Grotto flourish. We have an unusual amount of successful writers. When we started out, six of the nine writers when I joined, five of us have New York Times bestsellers. It's kind of unbelievable and I think it was the power of the group that made that happen. Mary Roach, a bestselling author, was a Grotto member and she said: "Writers turns out like raw meat. They need to marinate. I believe I became the author I am by soaking in the talent, passion and affection of the people at the Grotto." And she's right. I think marination is a really good word for it because when you are around all these other people who are writing books, plays, screen plays, articles, you realize what's possible for you. I knew a fellow Grotto author who said to me: "Caroline, girls need to hear about the adventures you have". It seems obvious now, but I never would have thought of it if she hadn't told me.

People come to us a lot and ask us how they can start a Grotto-like community. We offer advice on how to do that. One woman came up to me and said she want to start one in Chicago. She wanted to get every creative art under one roof. And I actually suggested to her to find people with the same narrative vision, storytellers, because in that way you can all help each other. There's a certain energy, I think, an inner change of ideas and inspiration when you're all sort of heading towards the same fire. At the Grotto, the only real sort of qualification is to be published in your field. And the idea is to have enough of a background that everybody can help each other.

One last lesson from my adventures, and it's a pretty obvious one. It's a resilience. The ability to pick yourself up after a failure and go forward. By 2008 I had published two books, and this was a pretty good fit. It was nothing spectacular, but pretty cool. I was finishing two new novels. Combined, they've taken me about four years. That's four years of going into the Grotto and writing.

And then finally, the first of these two books was ready to make the rounds of the publishing houses. And I couldn't sell it. I was devastated. Fifteen publishers rejected it. And I wondered if I just should quit writing. I wept in the hallways at the Grotto and the writers rallied around me and they said: "Hey, Caroline, you got another book. What about that other book? But before I had the chance to do that one, I crashed my experimental airplane. I almost killed myself. For those of you who don't know what an experimental airplane is, it's a hand glider with a lawn mower underneath. I was confined to my sofa for months with injuries. All in all, it took about a year to recover. And I was lucky enough to have my fiancée, Wendy, and for some reason, instead of realizing this in not what she'd bargained for and leaving, she decided to stay and take care of me. But she was in for a lot, in that year I became crazy. Some of you know. I decided, among other things, it was imperative that I find out where my cat was going when it ran outside. And since I was so badly injured, I couldn't follow him, so I first used GPS and then a small camera on his collar and then a video camera. I even went to animal communication's class to

see if it would talk to me. Meanwhile, I finished the second novel and I sent that out. And it too was rejected by fifteen publishers. And I said again I'm quitting, I can't spend five years of my life on something that doesn't go anywhere. It's not possible financially, emotionally. And again I wept in hallways of the Grotto and again they prompt me up. Wendy said she believed in me. She said: "You'll think of something." I guess it was the same resilience that got me crawling eight and a half miles, kept me crashing at every turn, yet getting at the U.S.A. Luge National Team anyway, that I kept writing. And this time I decided it will be a nonfiction book. It only required a proposal and I would try yet again. So I sent that out. And you guessed it. Fifteen publishers rejected it. I felt only slightly better about this third punch in the gut because it only took three months to write a proposal instead of the five years that I spent on the other two books, but still it was another rejection. And I told Wendy: "I'm done! I have to find another career."

But there was one glimmer of hope in me. There was still a little bit of resilience because I already published two books. So I knew I could do it. I do know a lot of people whose rejections happen at the very beginning of their career. And that is the hardest. I think if that had happened, I'd probably would have given up writing. But I was lucky. I had two books behind me. Meanwhile, I've been telling acquaintances and strangers about the year of my crash and recovery. And the eyes of people all over San Francisco were glazing over with boredom as I explained with the evangelism of anybody who thinks that their private agony is a relieving story about the intense depression that comes with bad injury. But when I mentioned that during this intense depression I had stalked my cat using a variety of technologies, I noticed that their eyes lit up. So it took me a while, but I saw that was the book I had to write. And it got published. And it was published in ten languages, including Romanian. That proves the resilience is worth it. And now, I have another book called "The Gutsy Girl" and that too is in Romanian.

To that end, I'm sure in my future there's a new round of rejected books and proposals and when that happens I'll weep in the hallways, I'll tell Wendy that I'm done with writing and then I'll do what successful writers and adventures all over the world do. I'll find a new niche to fill, I'll muster the support of my adventure buddies, I'll call upon my resilience and I'll keep writing. Thank you!