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Short Life Lessons From Chris Orcutt

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Chris Orcutt is an Amazon-bestselling American novelist. He is an award-winning and critically acclaimed writer who has written professionally for 30 years as a novelist, journalist, scriptwriter, playwright, and speechwriter. [Orcutt](#) is the author of the critically acclaimed [Dakota Stevens Mystery Series](#). The first novel in the series, [A Real Piece of Work](#), was a #1 Amazon bestseller in 2012.

Where did you grow up and what was your childhood like? Did you have any particular experiences/stories that shaped your adult life?

When I was a kid, I thought I had a great childhood, but as I've gotten older I've come to recognize that it was deeply stressful, anxiety-producing, and largely unstable. This is probably a gift because, as Hemingway once remarked, the best training for a writer is an unhappy childhood.

You see, my family moved a lot when I was a kid: many towns and different schools in Maine, Massachusetts, and New York. By the time I left for college at 18, I'd moved well over a dozen times. This was incredibly difficult because I never established roots anywhere. Every community we moved into, I was "the new kid." The teachers didn't know anything about me—my strengths and talents, my personal history—and I had to establish myself all over again. For example, I'll never forget starting first grade in a new school, and the teacher didn't believe that I already knew how to read (I had been for two years), so I had to prove it to her in front of the school principal—something frightening and embarrassing for a 5-year-old. For other reasons, there were a lot of financial and family struggles during my childhood as well.

I stayed a lone wolf through college, not allowing myself to get close to many people because I never knew when I'd be moving away. But now that I'm an adult and work in a profession where solitude, self-reliance, and self-direction truly are assets, I'm grateful for my difficult childhood. I became much more self-reliant and self-confident than some other people I know who lived in one community for their entire childhood and were coddled and celebrated by their communities.

What is something you wish you would've realized earlier in your life?

I wish I'd realized in my teens that most adults—particularly one's parents and teachers—aren't equipped to encourage you to pursue your dreams, because most of them weren't encouraged to pursue theirs. During my late teens and early 20s, while I was reading fiction and teaching myself how to write, I was also waiting to get some sage advice and encouragement from these people—"permission" to

follow my dream. What I got instead (with a couple of exceptions) were discouragement, skepticism, and ambivalence. Fortunately, I was born with a maverick, “I’ll show them” disposition, so I didn’t listen to my parents, teachers, or anyone else who thought my pursuing writing as a profession was a bad idea. I went ahead and did it anyway. If I could go back in time, though, I’d like to tell my teenage self not to wait for “permission” to pursue his dream. I’d tell him, “Forget what anybody else says or thinks. No one knows what’s in your heart. No one knows the depths of your ability, your persistence, or your commitment to this thing you love. Just do it.”

What are bad recommendations you hear in your profession or area of expertise?

With the ascendancy of the internet and social media, the writing profession is rife with bad recommendations proffered by charlatans, quick-buck artists, and “insta-experts.” The worst of this advice comes in many forms, but its general message to would-be novelists is that they need to spend the majority of their time building their online presence, interacting with followers on social media, and promoting themselves and their “brand.” These activities might help them to become internet marketing experts, but they’re not going to help them become better writers. I’m saying this from experience, having spent 12 years (or, tragically, the equivalent of a year of my life) building my social media and internet “brand”—interacting with followers, hiring experts, etc. Sadly, despite all of that work, I gained very few readers or book buyers, and none of those efforts made my writing better or the creating of novels any easier.

If someone wants to become a novelist or a writer of book-length nonfiction, that person needs to be reading all the time and writing all the time. (For inspiration with this approach, read Jack London’s novel, *Martin Eden*.) Like any other art, you only get better at writing by doing it—daily practice. You should read good books about craft, grammar, and punctuation (there are lists of these books on my website), and get instruction from a teacher or mentor here and there, but ultimately no one can teach you how to be a novelist. You become a novelist by writing a novel, learning from the process, and writing another one. For this reason, be wary of books on writing with the words “easy,” “quick” or “weekend” in the titles; avoid most writing “workshops,” which too often are studies in procrastination; and don’t get lured into expensive MFA programs that promise you the keys to the writing kingdom. Because guess what? There are no keys to the kingdom. You create your own keys through hard work, through rigorous reading, writing, and self-study.

In general, so much of the bad advice out there revolves around finding shortcuts. Stop wasting your time looking for shortcuts. As I used to say to my students when I taught college writing, “The only shortcut in writing is the knowledge that there are no shortcuts.”

Tell me about one of the darker periods you’ve experienced in life. How you came out of it and what you learned from it?

In January 2015, I released what I considered one of my best novels to date: *A Truth Stranger Than Fiction*. To promote it, I hired a publicity firm and did dozens of radio interviews. My previous two novels in the series (*A Real Piece of Work* and *The Rich Are Different*) had sold fairly well, and I even got some interest in the new novel from a Hollywood producer. And then...it all came to nothing. The book sales never materialized. The producer “passed” on the book. Making matters worse, I was having personal, health, and financial struggles at the time, so the lukewarm reception to my new novel was devastating.

For a short while—the first time ever in my life—I seriously considered quitting writing. I was profoundly bitter for months. But an ember in me—my deep love of writing and particularly of sentences—refused to go out, and by the end of the year, I started the epic novel I’ve been writing since then. I realized that while the commercial and popularity aspects of the writing life continued to elude me, the act of writing was always there, and it always delivered.

I realized that while I couldn’t control anything else about writing—sales, popularity, my readership, or how my books might be received—I could control whether or not I did this thing I loved every day—the actual writing and weaving of stories. Before this crisis, I frequently said to myself, “Why can’t these problems sort themselves out so I can just write?” After the crisis, I started saying to myself, “Just write, and these problems will sort themselves out.”

What is one thing that you do that you feel has been the biggest contributor to your success so far?

Daily moisturizing. No, seriously, it’s that I’m constantly producing new work. At any given time I have three or four novels in progress, and when the well runs dry with one, I pull another one out of the cabinet and resume work on it. I don’t allow myself to get hung up for too long on the reception of a novel I’ve just

published, because the day I publish one is the day I start the first draft of a new one.

Back in my early thirties, I read a book titled *Cracking Creativity* that espoused a principle I adopted and have used ever since: You get high-quality ideas and work by producing a high quantity of ideas and work. My writing has gotten better over the past 20 years, and will continue to get better I believe because I keep writing—no matter what. Through personal or health crises, or periods of writer's block, I've managed to write something—a poem, a journal entry, a letter, a thank-you card—every day. Even when I was earning a living with my pen in journalism, technical writing, or speechwriting, my fiction writing was always my first priority; I would write it before leaving for work or on the commuter train.

What is your morning routine?

I'm glad you ask this because after writing professionally for a decade, I discovered that the most important key to productivity is having a routine that is sacrosanct. In a constantly changing world, a sea of tumultuous waves, the novelist's routine is his bulwark, his sturdy immovable lighthouse.

With few exceptions, I'm up and at the writing desk every day by 5 a.m. Sometimes it's as early as 3:00 or as late as 6:00, but it's always early. I make coffee, sit down at one of my typewriters, and insert a fresh pair of earplugs. As they expand in my ears, the already quiet outside world gets shut out completely; it's like I'm descending into the ocean in a bathysphere. Now I'm calm and focused. I write until 6:30, at which point I bring my wife coffee in bed, we discuss our plans for the day, and I return to my office. After breakfast, I write until noon. As a part of this routine is a minimum daily word count of 1,500 words, and to keep myself accountable, I record each day's writing output on a wall calendar. After lunch, I continue writing until 2:30 or 3:00 p.m., at which point I'm free to do whatever I want: exercise, go hiking, call a friend, or just take a drive and explore someplace I've never been—what writing coach Julia Cameron calls an “artist date.”

What habit or behavior that you have pursued for a few years has most improved your life?

There are two things I now do daily that have radically improved my life, and I've discovered they go hand-in-hand: exercise and sobriety. As a kid, I was a very active outdoorsman and athlete, and I've learned that for an adult novelist exercise is even more crucial. Novel writing is the ultimate endurance activity; writing a novel—

especially a very long one—takes years and years. That’s years and years of sitting, repetitive motion, etc., which wreaks havoc on your muscles, joints, and cardiovascular health. For the past five years or so, every afternoon I’ve gone on long walks, run, swam, hiked, skied, or done strength training and stretching, and I’m so glad I have. Not only do I physically feel better, but my thinking is sharper and clearer.

As a part of this, two years ago I got sober from alcohol, and I’ve stayed sober ever since. For a long time, I bought into the myth perpetuated by Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and other alcoholic writers that drinking is an integral part of the writing life. Since then I’ve learned that alcohol muddles my thinking, preventing me from doing my best writing, and it creates drama and discord in my life. Sometimes I wish I were one of those writers who could have a couple of beers or whiskies once in a while—say, to celebrate a success—but alas I’m not. I’m an alcoholic and I always will be.

What are your strategies for being productive and using your time most efficiently?

Most of my strategies center around eliminating distractions and limiting my use of digital technology. For starters, I write the first drafts of all of my books in pencil or on one of my manual typewriters. Why? Because neither the pencil nor the typewriter prompts me to “update” it, check email, research something on the internet, chat with friends, etc. When I’m using a pencil or a typewriter, it’s just me and the page, me and the words. I then retype those words, or scan and OCR them, into a computer later on.

Overall, I don’t use the internet very much, and I’ve reduced my presence on social media or my blog to one post every few months—only when I have something to say or am announcing a new book, interview, or event. Without the social media distraction machine in my life—this endless cavalcade of the comparison trap—I couldn’t be happier. Regarding the news, I don’t watch, read or listen to it (and haven’t for more than a decade). Why not? So I don’t get sucked into the current outrage du jour and waste my time and creative energy bitching about injustices I have no control over. Finally, although I do have a smartphone (I got my first one in 2020), I keep it in a drawer in another room, and most of the time I don’t even look at it until my writing is done for the day.

For all of us—but for novelists especially—the most precious commodity is time, and novel-writing is a rapacious consumer of it. Therefore, I value my time highly

and am very protective of it, spending it only with people or doing activities that add value to my life or give me joy. A while back, I read a quote by NFL quarterback Tom Brady that so resonated with me, I framed it and added it to my wall of inspiration: "Sustained peak performance isn't about changing one or two habits in your life. It is your life. ... Every hour of every day in my life revolves around my job." That's me—every hour of every day in my life revolves around my writing: writing more and better, going deeper, trying to create work that will last.

In the final analysis, I'm about the words, and I'm about crafting them by hand. My best friend likens me to a maker of samurai swords, living deep in the mountains and forging and hammering swords of great strength and beauty. Samurai swordsmith. I'll take that.

What book(s) have influenced your life the most? Why?

In my early teens, I was inspired by the stories of [Sherlock Holmes](#) and [Ian Fleming's James Bond novels](#). I still remember the balmy summer vacation morning at 13 when I was reading *Goldfinger* for the first time. I was so struck by the beauty of Fleming's language in describing the Loire Valley in France, that I knew at that moment that I wanted to become a novelist. My goal was to write that well myself someday.

In my late teens and early 20s, two other novels strongly influenced me with their masterful use of language: [Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*](#) and [Nabokov's *Lolita*](#); since then, I've read both of them two dozen times easily; every page of those two masterpieces contains at least one remarkable, genius sentence. And in my early 30s, I read a little nonfiction book titled *Mastery* that made me formalize my work as a writer, specifically my daily practice and long-term pursuit of excellence.

Do you have any quotes you live by or think of often?

This is a tough question, because my office is filled with framed inspirational quotes, and on any given day I have a dozen different quotes tumbling around in my head: favorite sentences from novels, lines of movie dialogue, snatches of poetry and plays, even passages from the Bible. I just love great language. But there are two quotes that are my go-to motivational thoughts, and I have them hanging over my writing desk.

For writing, there's this one by Hemingway: "It's your object to convey everything to the reader so that he remembers it not as a story he had read, but as something

that happened to himself. That's the true test of writing." I also have that on a T-shirt and can recite it from memory. And for writing and life motivation, I have a quote from the movie *Beyond the Edge*, a documentary about Sir Edmund Hillary and Tensing Norgay summiting Mount Everest: "There are just certain human beings able to put one foot in front of the other—relentlessly, psychologically able to do it—whereas other people would fail." Over the past five years that I've been writing my 600,000-word epic novel, I've re-watched that scene (Hillary and Norgay are painfully close to the summit) many, many times. Not only have those words motivated me to keep putting one foot in front of the other on my project, but as I've continued to make progress on the book they've also shown me that I am one of those "certain human beings," and that's a great feeling.