

We've all done it. Made a decision to change our lives in some way and then stuck to it. Or not. My personal test is always the decision to start a diet. So I join Weight Watcher, again, or Jenny Craig or some other expensive program and get going. Now if I'm really committed this time, I will shift my priorities to accommodate this new endeavor. Clean out the cupboards and the fridge so that all temptations are gone. Give up bread and desserts when I eat out with friends. Maybe even quit driving through MacDonald's on my way home from work. I am focused on a goal and the pounds begin to drop off. The closer I get to reaching that goal, the more motivated I am to stick with what needs to be done. My priorities are clear. I WILL NOT be swayed toward that luscious chocolate mousse pie or hot from the oven dinner roll. I can see the end in sight and I am WINNING!

It should be this way for you if you are sure you want to be a successful writer. Have you set a goal to complete a manuscript? Do you have a contract and a clear deadline already? Are your priorities in order so that you will meet your goal? Or have you let old habits keep you from becoming the best you can be. It's easy to drift away from the focus you need in this messy business of writing. At least Weight Watchers puts us on a scale each week and gives us pep talks. There's accountability. If you are letting things like the Internet, shopping (my personal distracter) or just plain procrastination (which I've mentioned before here is nothing but fear wrapped in another name) keep you from succeeding, then your priorities are not where they need to be.

But wait. Perhaps you don't want this writing career as badly as you thought you did. If you'd really rather be playing Angry Birds, go for it. Maybe the fantasy of being a famous romance writer is enough for you. Perhaps sitting in the company of successful authors at chapter meetings is what you crave. Ask any one of them who have produced books under contract year after year if they have had to make sacrifices to do so. Don't be surprised if the answer is "Hell, yes!"

I know early in my writing career, with a young son at home and a full time job, I had to carve out time anywhere I could find it. It was usually when my husband was relaxing, watching TV. After the late news, he'd stop by my "office", which was a corner of the bedroom where his children slept when they visited every other weekend, and ask hopefully if I was ready to come to bed. It was code for "Am I getting any tonight?" The answer was usually

“Just a few more minutes.” Now you know how we are when we’re in the flow of a story. That few more minutes could turn into hours. He was usually snoring by then. Luckily he believed in me. When I finally sold my fifth or sixth manuscript after many rejections, no one could have been prouder than John.

So what are your priorities? Most of us put family first. Or God. After that? Think hard. If it’s a writing career you’re after, suck it up and decide what else has to go. I quit worrying about a spotless house long ago. And gourmet dinners? Which, don’t laugh, I enjoy making. The to do list that haunts me daily has had to be pared down. Sure I need to do some promo on Facebook and Twitter. But if I’m spending more than an hour a day on it, I’m not putting my time to good use. My next book doesn’t come out until March, 2013. My big P.R. push will be closer to that time. Right now, I just need small daily reminders to my fans that I’m alive and writing. Do I need to judge a bunch of contests? No. Just the one my chapter sponsors. Do I need to teach a lot of workshops? Only if my home chapter needs me. How about conferences? One a year, the one that will give me the best chance to meet fans.

Right now I have three goals—to write the next book in my Real Vampires series, to develop a new series and to increase my fan base. Everything I do needs to help me reach those goals. So I have to ask myself whether how I’m spending my time is getting me closer to those goals. Do I deserve some down time? Of course. And I just took a week off to visit friends and family. But writing is my job, it pays me well. I’d better start treating it better. Luckily I have a critique group that’s even tougher than a Weight Watcher’s meeting at assessing progress and giving pep talks. If my priorities slip, I hear about it over our weekly lunches. Which are not exactly dietetic. Hey, one priority at a time.

Gerry Bartlett is the nationally best-selling author of the Real Vampires series from Berkley. Her next release is REAL VAMPIRES KNOW HIPS HAPPEN, March, 2013, #9 in the series. You can read past Perils articles at gerrybartlett.com.