

The Perils of Being Published: Paying It Forward by Gerry Bartlett

I don't always go to chapter meetings any more. Bad, Gerry. But when a published author I know and like is presenting a workshop, I try to be there to support her. We had a meeting recently where I felt the urge to do just that. The presenter was a well-published author and her topic was a basic craft issue that couldn't hurt and might help my writing. The meeting was sparsely attended. I sat at a table with three other published authors. Actually, all three of us had what Oprah called "light bulb moments" during that one hour talk. We each came away with a good idea that will help us make our current works in progress better. The presenter was happy that we were there, we were happy that we'd made the effort. Win-win.

Now I know some of the people who didn't make it to the meeting had good and legitimate reasons for not coming—illness, last minute babysitting issues. Hey, I've been there. But I also used to duck out because it seemed like too much effort to go for a topic I thought I'd "mastered". Yeah, right. If I've learned one thing in the over twenty years I've been writing it's that you never master the craft. And that sometimes hearing a lesson from a new voice in a slightly different way is just what you needed to make a difference in your approach to your work. The topic that night was adding tension, suspense, even turning it into a thriller. Now I write paranormal comedy. Is there anything further from that? But it hit my sweet spot perfectly. I got an idea that will make my plot rock. And if you don't have tension in even the lightest of inspirations, who is going to turn the page?

But my point here is that the author who gave the workshop was paying it forward. Sharing her knowledge. She didn't have to. She had a deadline, two actually, and should have been home working on those books. Instead she drove over an hour, each way, to give us the benefit of her experience. We didn't buy her books, it didn't make her a bunch of money. Yes, we gave her a small stipend, but it was barely enough to pay for gas and tolls. She likes our

company, but not that much. Instead, she's the kind of long-time member of RWA who thinks you should give back what you got when you started out. So she does.

Another way to give back is mentoring. We have or had the PAL program. I don't know what in the heck they are calling it now but it sometimes works. My PAL was a gem. She was unpublished when she read my books and posted great reviews of them everywhere. She stood up in chapter meetings and raved about them. I knew she was writing Regency historicals and had won contests. So I recommended her to my agent. I didn't have to, but I wanted to reward her for a job well done and I knew her writing was excellent. She didn't connect with my agent but went on to get one of her own. And sold three books, then three more. Now Vicky Dreiling is a best-selling author in her own right. She doesn't have to be a PAL now. But she asked if she could still be mine. Because she remembers my early encouragement. That's the ideal way to make that system work. She never asked me for anything. I offered. **Because** she didn't ask. She just supported me unconditionally the best way a PAL could, by recommending my books to others.

Are you using your local chapter the best way you know how? Are you attending meetings and learning from the presentations? Are you networking with each other? I've told the story many times of how I met my critique group at a chapter meeting twenty years ago. Unpubbed then, multi-pubbed now. Afraid to put yourself forward? Volunteer. I met the most people when I was a chapter president and headed our local literacy luncheon. I also served as newsletter editor a few years. You can be a membership chair and greet people as they come in and hand out name badges. No chapter where you are? Then use your on-line connections. Set up dialogues with those on your loop. Arrange meetings at conferences. I still correspond with a friend I made and sat next to at an RWA signing.

You never know when one of your efforts to help others will turn out to be the key to open a door for you. Vicky and I are good friends. She had the writing chops to get her own

agent and contracts, but she hasn't forgotten my email when she was sitting in an airport in London that offered to introduce her to my agent. It came at a time when she was tired, chained to a soul-sucking job, and wondering if she'd ever sell a book. Sometimes, when we are down, a little encouragement is all it takes to keep us going. You might get it at a chapter meeting. Be that encourager for someone. You won't be sorry. And, who knows? If I decide to write another historical, maybe Vicky will recommend me to her editor.

I can't close this column without a warning. People volunteer all the time and then don't follow through. I was blessed with a PAL who did. Many of my published friends wasted advance copies of their books on PALs who never posted a single review. I've seen contest volunteers drop the ball and other members scramble to pick it up for them. If you really don't want to do something, please don't make that promise. One lesson I taught my son when he was growing up was to never commit to do a job unless he intended to follow through. He is a fine man today, still employed when everyone else in his department has been laid off. Because he is *reliable*. In the publishing business, reliability is worth a lot too. Word gets around. If you're a flake, undependable, always late on a project? Well, just don't try it. You want your publisher to ask you to contribute to an anthology or special project, to offer you the next contract, not to hesitate because you screwed up their schedule. Enough said. I know that's not you.

Now I'm off to use that great tip I got from last month's meeting. Keep writing but remember, a couple of hours a month at a meeting isn't wasted time. It may give you just what you need to make your story better.

Gerry Bartlett is the best-selling author of the Glory St. Clair series. Her next release is *REAL VAMPIRES KNOW HIPS HAPPEN*, March, 2013, from Berkley Publishing is number 9 in the series. You can read other Perils articles on her website at gerrybartlett.com.