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Wisdom From The (Not So Secret) Order of The Titanides: Vol. 5

TRUE GRIT How an Insecure Illinois Farm Girl Failed Her Way to Success as a Top Copywriter

NOTE: This is an excerpt from my talk at American Writers & Artists Fast Track to Copywriting Success Bootcamp in 2018. I'll be speaking again this year at Bootcamp on Wednesday, May 15th. I hope to see you all there.



In 2010, my oldest son Jake was 18 years old. My youngest son, Nathan, was 10. And I was working my butt off to become a top copywriter.

I was working for Schaeffer's Investment Research at the time, writing "hot copy" emails to options traders. Then at night I would stay up late learning to write health copy and doing homework assignments for my copy cub group.

I studied everything I could get my hands on. I was writing controls out by hand, reading books and rewriting my copy over and over and over again.

Nathan's fifth grade teacher asked me if I worked the third shift. And when I said, "No, why?" She said, "Oh, Nathan said you worked all night..."

My office was right off of the kitchen, and the boys would see me sitting at my computer when they left for school in the morning... and I'd still be sitting there when they went to bed at night.

Every October they watched me leave for Florida for the week for the AWAI Fast Track to Copywriting Success Bootcamp. They were excited because this usually meant they got to eat a lot of pizza and White Castle while I was gone.

In October of 2010, my son Jake had just graduated high school and he was taking a year off before starting college. I asked him, "Jake how would you like to come with me to AWAI Bootcamp this year? The hotel is right on the beach and we can have fun and you can see what I do." He immediately said, "Sure, mom,

cool. That sounds like fun."

So Jake came with me. I was running around like a crazy woman like I always do. I was talking with everyone and I was going to presentations and happy hours and dinners. Jake came to some of the sessions with me, but he was kind of bored. So he slept in a lot and wandered up and down Atlantic Avenue and honestly, I think he watched a lot of R-rated movies in the room. Then on Friday Jake brought me this brochure and he said, "Mom, do you want to take a surfing lesson with me?"

I said, "Buddy, I'd love to, but I've got to get ready for job fair today. But you should go without me and I can set it up for you."

Honestly, the thought of getting into a swimsuit in public where any of my clients might see me, terrified me to death! Plus, I'm not the most athletic person on the planet.

So Jake went to the surfing lesson without me and when he came back, I asked him about it. He sort of shrugged and said, "It was OK, but it wasn't as much fun alone."

Of course I felt bad, so on Saturday night I took Jake out to dinner at Dada's, just the two of us. After dinner Jake said, "Thanks for bringing me to bootcamp, Mom. I had a good time and it was cool to see what you do. I never really understood it before."

My "All Is Lost" Moment

Eighteen months later, my husband Tom and I were driving to Chicago to pick up Jake from college. We had dropped him off that fall as a bright, promising freshman at the University of Chicago. Less than eight months later, we got a phone call that Jake was in the emergency room suffering from a major psychotic break.

That same sweet kid who helped Denise Ford out with job fair, played blues guitar and loved snowboarding was now in the psychiatric ward at Chicago Lakeshore Hospital.

We found out he had been using every drug known to mankind, most of which I had never heard of. He was paranoid and anxious. He refused to speak to us. And he had lost so much weight, I didn't even recognize him.

The doctors couldn't tell us what was wrong or if Jake's mind would ever come back. The drugs he was using were too new. No one had studied them before.

The doctors didn't know if the drugs were causing the mental illness or if the mental illness was triggering the drug use. They just kept saying "we don't know" over and over again.

All I knew was the boy that I had raised was gone and I was haunted by regret. I wanted to scream, "If you had told me this was going to happen, I would have done everything differently."

And I kept thinking about that stupid surfing lesson. I kept thinking I should have gone surfing with him. I should have said yes. As if squeezing my middle-aged overweight body into a wet suit would bring my son back.

Over the next five years, Jake failed and relapsed over and over again. But each time, he got back up and tried again. He was in and out of psychiatric hospitals and treatment centers. But he kept trying.

He tried medication after medication until he found the ones that worked. He stayed sober for one month, then six months, then a year.

Eventually he returned to college in Cincinnati and passed one class, then two, then three.

You see, it turned out... that the same quality that Jake witnessed in me night after night...

The same quality that allowed me to fail my way to success as a top copywriter...

It's the same quality that helped Jake to slowly fight his way back to us...

And that quality is something I call TRUE GRIT.

TRUE GRIT is what allowed me to go from an insecure Illinois farm girl...

To a top direct response copywriter.

It's what allowed me to work with the best copywriters in the industry. And it's the secret behind my multimillion-dollar controls in both alternative health and finance.

And if YOU want to make your dreams come true, if YOU want to become a top copywriter or freelancer, if you want to create a better life, then...

You too must learn to cultivate TRUE GRIT.

Now the word "grit" has gotten a lot of play lately. Especially after Angela Duckworth's viral TED talk and bestselling book, called (what else?) Grit.

According to Duckworth's research, grit is a better predictor of success than I.Q. or talent. And by grit, she means the passion and perseverance to pursue your long-term goals. She's talking about a kind of relentless determination to succeed despite all obstacles.

But the problem with Duckworth's formula is that it's based on an outdated model of "survival of the fittest". It only considers the individual in isolation and it completely ignores the power of the community.

And that's a problem, because more and more of us are working together on teams. And it turns out that this requires a different kind of grit.

In his new bestselling book, *Big Potential*, top researcher Shawn Achor explains that success is NOT just about how creative or smart or "gritty" you are...

Success is about how well you are able to connect with, contribute to, and benefit from the community of people around you.

Google Makes a Gritty Discovery

A couple of years ago, the scientists on Google's famous People Analytics team decided to try to figure out how to build the perfect high-performing team. They code-named their experiment "Project Aristotle."

They sorted through millions and millions of data points in order to determine the individual characteristics that contribute to success... They looked at specific skill sets, intelligence, personalities, backgrounds, everything...

And they could not find one single individual trait in isolation that predicted success on a top-performing team. Not one.

What the Google geeks discovered was that it's not about "who" you are in isolation. It's the ecosystem around you that determines your success. If you want to succeed as a top performer in today's world, you need two things, according to the Google research.

First, you have to understand the importance of social connections. You have to understand that other people matter, not just yourself.

And second, you need to help create an environment where everyone's ideas are respected and shared equally.

When that happens, according to Google's reams of research, teams of ordinary Joes like you and me beat the pants off of any team of so-called geniuses.

When I talk about true grit, I'm not just talking about resilience and dogged determination to reach your goal... I'm talking about generosity and community as well.

It turns out that true grit is NOT about being a lone gun-slinging John Wayne... true grit is about being part of a *community* of gritty, determined marketers, entrepreneurs, and copywriters. Because when you help others succeed, you dramatically increase your own chances of success.

And in today's world, I believe that true grit is more important and more relevant to our industry than ever. That is because....

The pace of failure is increasing.

When I first started out in this business, I would work for three months on a large direct mail campaign for someone like Bottom Line. Three months!

And then it had to go to the printer, and then it would be mailed. So my copy would be tested maybe four times a year at the most.

Now we are testing every single day. We're testing subject lines. We're testing Facebook ads. We're testing three different headlines. We can split test to our infinite delight, thanks to the development of the Internet. We're hammering a lot of nails.

This means we can succeed faster, but it also means we can burn out faster.

And this constant testing means that you are going to fail more. It's just numbers. It doesn't have anything to do with your skill. If you are testing more... and faster... and every day, then you will by nature fail more because you are taking more risks, and no one is perfect.

Without the foundation of true grit, the first time you fail, you'll quit altogether. Or worse, you won't quit but you will be constantly tormented by the fear of failure. You'll avoid taking risks because you might fail or might not do it perfectly.

That means that having true grit and resilience is more critical now than it has ever been.

Now the first ingredient, and what I think may be the single most important ingredient, in true grit is...

FAITH OVER FAILURE

What I mean by that is you must believe that every failure will be useful to you, period.

So, my favorite quote from Einstein is when he said ... and I'm paraphrasing here, 'The most important decision you make is whether you believe the universe is friendly or not.'

Now I believe in a friendly universe, so I am going to push you hard to reframe your failures as successes that just haven't arrived yet. Because what you learn from your failures pushes you closer to success.

I have survived some epic failures in my career, and I am still standing, still working, still learning.

I remember yet another AWAI Bootcamp in 2006. I was recruiting writers for Schaeffer's Investment Research. But I loved the Motley Fool copy, and I was dying to be able to write for them.

So, I emailed Denise Ford, and I said, "Denise, could you do me a favor? Could you please put my table next to the table for the Motley Fool at job fair?" And she said, "Of course, darling, we'd be happy to do that."

So, my little table was set up right next to the Motley Fool, and all night long, as people were coming up and asking questions, I was sort of sidling over to Paul Elliot at The Motley Fool a half step at a time.

When we got to the end of job fair, I said, "Hey, Paul. I would love to talk to you more about the work that you're doing. How about if I buy you a beer after job fair?"

A couple of months later, the Motley Fool hired me to write a stock tease promo. I believe it was for Rule Breakers, and the promo was about a company that made a very advanced security screening system for airports.

I mean, I think it told you if you had an extra filling in your back teeth when you went through.

So, I wrote this long form package. I did all the research. I poured my heart and soul into that package.

They sent out my promotion. Of course, I was anxiously biting my nails, because this was not direct mail, this was real time. The promo went out in the morning, and I'd know by 5 p.m. how it was doing.

I e-mailed the folks at the Fool at the end of the day, and they said, "Actually, we don't have any sales." And I thought, "Oh my God." And they said, "No. No. Don't worry. We think there was a glitch in sending it out. We're going to send it again tomorrow, and we've put in four test sales so that we can make sure that it's going through."

The next morning the e-mail went out again, and it generated exactly four sales. One for each of the four test orders put in.

That's right. My first package got exactly zero orders. Do you know how hard you have to work to make sure that nobody buys from your copy? I mean, it takes work to get zero sales!

I felt so bad about the results that I offered to do another promotion for free.

You Have to Get Back in the Ring

Now, mind you, they were not about to give me another one of their flagship products. They were not idiots. So, they gave me a product that was so close to death it was on respirators, and that product was called Green Light.

Green Light was filled with all these financial tips like how to get the best deal on a Tempur-Pedic mattress, and where to find designer shoes at half price, and how to build a retirement fund on twenty dollars a month.

I had been studying how to write little bullets, little fascinations Bottom Line style. So, I looked at all those tips and hints and I wrote an entire package of bullets...

I poured my heart and soul into that new project, even though I was not getting a dime. I wrote it for free to learn from my failure. Not only did that package become the control, it actually resuscitated the product. The product continued to run for two or three more years, until they finally retired it, solely on the power of the package that I wrote.

Five years later, I got a call from the Motley Fool *again*, (because I'm a nice Midwestern girl and we mate for life so my clients are with me for decades...). The Motley Fool had just started selling option trading services and had just launched Motley Fool Options.

They weren't even working with freelancers at that point. All of their copywriters were in house.

But nobody had time to take on this Motley Fool Options project, so they called me.

The campaign my team and I created blew the doors open. It outperformed anything the in-house team had done, and the last time I checked, no one had beaten it yet.

None of that would have happened if I had given up after that first massive and very public wipe out. So, I went from zero sales – nada, zip, zilch – to \$3.5 million in sales for Motley Fool Options. That took grit.

So how do you get comfortable with failure?

Well, there are quite a few things you can do.

First, do NOT punish yourself. Instead do something nice for yourself.

One of my favorite books is *The Willpower Instinct* by Kelly McGonigal. In that book, she talks about how we all think that when we fail, we should beat ourselves up and punish ourselves. In fact, she says this is the one thing that people argue about with her even though she has all the studies to back it up.

Study after study shows that being hard on yourself leads to LESS motivation, WORSE self-control, and MORE failure. But self-forgiveness makes you more likely to take responsibility for the failure. Makes you more willing to receive feedback and more willing to learn. Because it takes away the shame and pain of thinking about what happened.

I recently had a failure where we were trying to launch a completely new product to a new audience. Everybody loved the copy. They all told me how great it was, and.... it completely bombed.

When I have a failure like this, I dye my hair blue to remind myself I've still got all that creativity inside of me. I get a pedicure, and I take care of me. And I follow fellow Titanide Carline Anglade-Cole's advice, and I eat a pint of Ben & Jerry's pralines and cream ice cream!

Second, capture the lesson.

Next, I go to my journal, and I write about all the lessons I learned from the failure. I capture the learning. And most importantly, I do it without judgment, just observing what I learned in the process.

Third, reframe the failure.

Finally, I reframe the failure. I remember early on in my career, before I was able to work with some of the best clients in the business, I had to take a few sketchy fly-by-night clients.

One of these sketchy clients took an amazing 18-page direct mail sales package that I had written for him and threw it out. He decided to post a three-sentence ad that looked like an Apple ad for a very complicated information product. As you can imagine, this did not work. My royalties went out the window right along with the copy.

Not only that, he didn't pay me the second half of my advance, saying, "Well, I didn't actually use your copy. I had to rewrite it all myself into these three sentences."

I remember calling my mentor David Deutsch. I was screaming, and yelling, and venting. David said to me, "So, Marcella, let me ask you. If you had gone to a conference, let's say a three-day conference, and they had taught you everything that you had done wrong in this situation and exactly how to avoid it in the future so that you would never do it again, what would you have paid for that?"

"I don't know. \$3,000 to not ever have this happen?"

"Okay, so how much was the last invoice that they owed you?"

"I don't know. \$2,498?"

"There you go. You just got all that knowledge at a bargain."

I cracked up, but it was so true. David had reframed everything that had happened with that client into yet another masterclass in how to manage client relationships.

Every copywriter, marketer or entrepreneur – even the most successful ones – have losses. You will have failures. I cannot protect you from this. It's like a mom who wants to stop her child from falling down and skinning his knees, but how else will he learn to walk, right?

You will have failures. It's what you do with those failures that matters the most. That is when you build your true grit. You believe that this failure will be useful to you. You choose, as Einstein did, to believe that the universe is friendly.

If you want to cultivate TRUE GRIT and succeed as a top copywriter, the second thing you need to practice is... GENEROSITY.

Now I'd like to think that I get some of my grit from my Midwestern grandmother, Margueriete Reeder.

My grandmother was raised in a small coal mining town in Diamond, Indiana, and she eventually moved to Tuscola, Illinois. There she met and married my grandfather, and together they raised a family and farmed for more than 60 years.



It was my Midwestern grandmother who taught me the value of generosity.

I remember when I was little, my mother told me a story about growing up on our family farm in Tuscola, Illinois. It was Christmas Eve, and there had been a horrendous snow storm. They had to use those massive "v ploughs" to clear the country roads, and it was still snowing. Mom said the snow was blowing sideways

across the prairie.

But nothing stopped my Grandmother Margueriete. So, grandma loaded my mom in the car and she set off across the fields to my great Uncle Floyd's house to drop off some gifts. And on the way back home, just after they turned onto the Villa Grove Hayes Road, my grandmother pulled in the gravel drive at a small isolated farm house. She told my mom to wait in the car, and she went inside.

Then she came back out and drove back to the farm. When they got home, she told my mom to brush her teeth and get in bed. My mom was upset, because this was NOT what they did on Christmas Eve. They were supposed to stay up late and make divinity fudge and listen to Christmas carols on the radio.

It was not until years later that my mom discovered that when my grandmother had passed that isolated farm house on the way home from Uncle Floyd's house, the pole light was on and my grandmother saw miles and miles of frozen laundry hanging on the line. And she knew something was very wrong.

So my grandmother stopped at that house even though she didn't know who lived there. And when she knocked on the door, she found a young woman alone with four small children sick with the flu. Her husband was a long-haul truck driver and he couldn't make it home.

My grandmother went home, told my mom to get in bed, and got warm clothes and laundry baskets and went back and helped that poor woman that night, a complete stranger, instead of staying in her own home and enjoying Christmas Eve.

That is what I mean when I talk about generosity. Both being generous and accepting generosity.

If you want to succeed, then get busy helping someone else succeed.

If this sounds too "woo woo" to you, then consider that I built a half-million-dollar copywriting business without any marketing. I built it by word of mouth only, on the strength and the back of generosity alone.

One of my favorite authors, Annie Dillard, says this about generosity in *The Writing Life*, which is one of the best books on writing in my opinion. She says, "... the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes."

When I say give and give generously, I mean for you to be generous to your potential clients, to give first before demanding they pay you or do something for

you. Recognize that you are at the beginning of your career, and many of them have decades of experience on you. Offer what you can. Offer them something you have that might be helpful to them.

And more important, offer the same generosity to each other. Once you begin to succeed in your career, I promise you, you will rapidly find that you have more than enough work. When that happens, turn around and offer the job to someone else. Show them how to write for your client. Your client will love you for it.

Get busy helping someone else succeed, and what will happen is your own resilience will grow. You will stop worrying about whether or not you actually have what it takes. You will stop obsessing over whether or not you can do this because you'll be too busy helping *others* learn how to do this. And in the process, research now shows, you will get better, and you will learn more and earn more.

The final thing you need to build TRUE GRIT is... COMMUNITY

Once again, it was my grandmother who taught me the value of community. My grandmother Margueriete was one of six sisters: Margueriete, Dorothea, Mertyl, Winifred, Genieve, and Berniece. They were all each other's best friends, and they were always driving back and forth from Illinois to Indiana to visit. And they took care of each other, always.



And if you want to succeed as a top copywriter... you need community too.

As Kevin Rogers from Copy Chief says, "Nobody writes alone."

I would have long since given up if it not for my teachers and mentors – and for this amazing community of marketers, entrepreneurs, and copywriters.

It is community and the power of connection that saved my copywriting career. It is community that gave me the grit and determination to keep going during the most challenging time in my career and my life.

You see, I had just begun to really take off as a copywriter. I had gotten that first control for Bottom Line. I was writing packages for the Motley Fool and Money Map Press. And I was earning royalties and a nice six-figure income.

And then my son, Jake, went off to college and fell into that black hole of depression, mental illness and addiction. I will never forget the night I got the

phone call from the college that he was in the emergency room after a suicide attempt.

The first person that I called was my mentor, David Deutsch. I called him to say, "David, I am not going to get this package done. I am jumping in my car. I am driving to Chicago."

We were in the middle of a massive bookalog for Bottom Line. They had rented the presses. They had bought the paper. This is old-school direct mail, so many things were on the line, but I could not possibly finish that package in that moment.

It was David who called Michele Wolk, the creative director at Bottom Line, and shared the news. And it was David who texted me the worst, terrible, black humor, awful puns as I was driving to Chicago. I was laughing and doing that laughing/crying thing you do when you're on the edge. And then two minutes later he texted me, "Too much?" To which I replied, "Absolutely not, keep them coming."

It was my mentors, Parris Lampropoulos and David Deutsch, and my entire team at Copy Harvest. They were the ones who got me through it. You need each other. This is community, and it is so powerful, and it will help you keep going when you are struggling. Community is where you get your true grit.

So how do you cultivate TRUE GRIT?

This past summer, I went to a mastermind training in Agoura Hills, California. I've been going out there for a couple of years to train with a top speaking coach named Bo Eason. My son Nathan has heard me talk about Bo, and he's seen me pacing the house and practicing my talks.

So, this past summer, Nathan asked if he could come with me to California and he wanted to bring the entire "squad" along. They had all just graduated from high school, and they'd been saving their money. They wanted to go to "Cali" and hang out while I was at the conference.

I rented this amazing Airbnb in Thousand Oaks, and the boys were running all over during the day. I was working nonstop as usual. Then on Saturday, they decided they wanted to take a surfing lesson.

So, I drove them over to Zuma Beach, and I was going to go across the street to the Starbucks and work. Then, one of the surf instructors turned to me and said,

"Wait, aren't you going with them?"

I looked at him and said, "Are you kidding? I'm 53 years old, twenty pounds overweight, and out of shape."

This young blond 20-something surfer dude didn't miss a beat, "I can totally get you up."

Then the boys chimed in, "Yeah, Ms. Allison, you should do it.... "

And Nathan said, "Come surfing with us..."

So, I said YES.

And I let this 20-year old surfer dude yank and tug and pack me into a wetsuit.

And I paddled out there and I swallowed buckets of salt water until it came out my nose...



And after about 50 tries, I managed to stand up. That's ME on the surfboard.

That is true grit, and that is what I know is buried deep inside every single one of you.

As long as you have true grit and you're generous, and you have faith over failure, and you are willing to be part of a community, then you can reach whatever goal you set for yourself in this industry as well.

I already know you've got what it takes to succeed. If this Illinois farm girl can fail her way to success, then you can too.

Build Your True Grit and Become a Sustaining Member of the Titanides Community Today

If you were at the Titanides Gala last fall, then you know that I encouraged everyone to become a sustaining member. I asked everyone to contribute \$29 to \$49 a month depending on their circumstances. Many of you signed up for a founding membership in the Titanides, and I'm incredibly grateful.

I also offered to "pay it forward" with a \$1.00 annual membership for anyone who could not afford to pay. And we have continued to deliver all the membership benefits to all Titanides, even those who have not yet joined. And that offer still stands for now.

So over the next few months, we will be migrating more and more of the community benefits over to the paid members. So if you find value in this newsletter, if you find value in this community, in the events, in the private Facebook group, in the connections and resources and mentoring, you owe it to yourself to become a paying, active member of the Titanides today.

BECOME A SUSTAINING MEMBER

Gifts of the (Not So Secret) Order of the Titanides

When you become a sustaining member of the Titanides today you get...

- Access to our private Titanides Facebook group, where you'll find collective mentoring from some of the most experienced women in the business. You'll get practical advice, connections to top marketers, job postings, copy lessons, life lessons and so much more.
- My weekly vlog (video blog) where I share life, business and copywriting lessons I've learned from my mentors, from my clients, from copy chiefing other writers, and from my own nearly 20 years in the business.

- Our monthly newsletter packed with insights, advice, stories, upcoming events, and more!
- Twice monthly live Fearless Fast Writes. These 45-minute sessions focus on writing to discover the revelations and ideas lurking just below the surface of your subconscious. Fast Writes are a great way to spark your imagination and get your creative juices flowing.
- Invitations to special events and in-person conversations like the Titanides book launch party at AWAI or the private women-only lunch at Copy Chief Live, or our upcoming "No ROI" women's retreat.
- Access to our Members-Only website where you can gorge on past newsletters, vlogs, and our first-ever Titanides conference with presentations by some of the best women in the industry. Plus, you can join our own Titanides marketplace with special offers on fantastic products for copywriters, marketers and Entrepreneurs.
- **Special Titanides Members-Only discounts in the Titanides Marketplace, including our upcoming book *Why Didn't Anyone Tell Me This Sh*t Before?***
- Plus upcoming interviews with women in our book who are top in their field with their best tips on copywriting, marketing, time management, letting go of fears... you name it.

[BECOME A SUSTAINING MEMBER](#)

If you're already a Sustaining Member:

[CHECK OUT WHAT'S NEW](#)

The Titanides will be gathering again in person at AWAI Bootcamp in May to celebrate the launch of our book, *Why Didn't Anybody Tell Me This Sh*t Before?* on Monday, May 13th, from 6 to 8 p.m. in Delray Beach, Florida.

If you haven't already, RSVP for the party to let us know you're coming. There's no charge. And, for the first time, men are included in our celebration.

RSVP FOR BOOK LAUNCH PARTY

I can't wait to see you all there!

Love,
Marcella