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Episode 144:

“Should You Put Your Book on Pause?”

Mike Michalowicz:

Welcome back to the Don't Write That Book Podcast, where you can learn how to write your bestseller and own your authorship. Follow along with us as we give you an insider's view of the book industry. Now here are your hosts, myself, Mike Michalowicz, and AJ Harper. So today we're gonna talk about should you put your book on pause? Yeah. I wanna start off with the first story because it's just funny, relevant to nothing. So I'm in Salt Lake City for, um, an event that we host for Profit First Professionals and we do an AMA. But the prior speaker to me going up, because I'm gonna do the AMA, was speaking on AI and it was such a fascinating structural conversation, not like here's the hot app of the day or something that they asked if they could also have her up for the AMA. So I'm like, "Yeah, absolutely." And, and we're both in questions. They're amazing. Well, one question comes to her and it's like this super complex situation like, you know, with the change dynamics of our environment, um, the new generational, um, use of, of technology, but there's this, this pushback and bah, bah, bah, bah, bah, you know, square root of this, pie of that, um, what's the future look like? And she answers. And then the next question's like, uh, so Mike, uh, how much do you bench? <laugh>

AJ Harper:

That was the question. And I'm like - From the audience? Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

How much do you bench?

AJ Harper:

What is the answer? <laugh> I don't know. You, it's not your, you don't really lift weights? No,

Mike Michalowicz:

I do. I lift weights a lot. I just don't, like I've never tried to in, since high school, try to max out, you know, and bench. I just thought it was so funny. So I, I don't know. I work out with weight. I work out with dumbbells. Uh-huh. And maybe I can get 75 pounds per side. So that's why I said, like, I think my max is 150. But like, well, what if it's a straight bar and something? I don't, I don't

AJ Harper:

Know. You just don't, you're just not, it's not your world.

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Mike Michalowicz:

I, I was anticipating that the AMA would be all, <laugh> all about, like, you know, business, growth of a membership organization, which every question was about, use of technology, and then this one. So I, I did, it was the Beavis and Butthead kind of thing, like, uh, uh, how would you bench? <laugh> Like, it was just

AJ Harper:

Weird. That is weird. Weird.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um, oh, I had something I just wanted to say that I admire about you. Oh, you know what I love about you, AJ?

AJ Harper:

Oh, and I know. Is

Mike Michalowicz:

The thoughtfulness and cautiousness you use in speaking about subjects. So this bonus episode, which we just recorded, but we don't know when it's gonna broadcast.

AJ Harper:

So likely it's - Likely... You probably listened to it a couple months ago. <laugh>

Mike Michalowicz:

Likely, exactly. Yeah. Likely you listened to a couple months ago, but we don't know. But I've noticed this, that you're selective in private conversation and in public conversation - Yeah. About anything. You're really cautious and careful. Yes. And that shows like a, a, a concern in cognitiveness that I don't see in many people. Really? Oh, yeah. Yeah, it's, it, you know, I joke around, I spill the tea. Most people spill the tea. And I think I default more toward like, oh, here's the story. And you're more like, let's consider every party. Even if someone is in the wrong, you're still careful about how you discuss them. Yeah. I admire that.

AJ Harper:

Thank you. I mean, yes. Certain people I probably would just say they're just wrong. But yes, I see what you're saying. I did after that episode then tell you a bunch more stuff. 'Cause we weren't on the air. Right. And I don't want, we weren't being recorded and I -

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, you felt it's not appropriate to put it out there.

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AJ Harper:

Yeah, it doesn't, it doesn't, yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

I, I just really admire that.

AJ Harper:

Oh, thanks. And I

Mike Michalowicz:

Think, and you do it in private life too.

AJ Harper:

You're right. I do. I'm very, I'm very measured.

Mike Michalowicz:

Very measured,

AJ Harper:

That's the word. I'm very measured. But you know what? Um, I think that just I've really cultivated that. Yeah. I've re - I've really cultivated that.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. It's a, it's a remarkable skill. All right.

AJ Harper:

But I blanked out on my admire thing now. You just like, you just blanked out.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, that's okay.

AJ Harper:

If I think of it, I'm gonna tell you in the middle of the middle of the episode.

Stop.

Mike Michalowicz:

Admire. Yeah. So this episode's sponsored by Simplified, which is an imprinted page two. Yep. Um, page two is an extraordinary publishing platform. Simplified is the imprint that I work with. And we are seeking actively right now authors in the space of entrepreneurship. Particularly that

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have profound kind of Occum's Razor type of ideas that they can deliver. Um, this episode specifically was inspired by one of your students.

AJ Harper:

Yes.

Mike Michalowicz:

Who?

AJ Harper:

Well, you know, I often am asking, "Hey, what do you guys want us to talk about? " Yeah. Um, and so this is, comes from Susan. And, uh, she's, uh, working on a book right now for people who've been in, um, you know, they've had a guru-like figure in their lives. And so she's working on, like, the fallout when maybe that situation is not healthy for you anymore.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, wow. Right? That's great.

AJ Harper:

I know.

Mike Michalowicz:

Like there's... Most people need that. Uh,

AJ Harper:

Most people.

Mike Michalowicz:

Did I tell you, I was on a episode recently of someone's podcast and I said, "I just want you to know you are my guru." And I said, "Oh."

AJ Harper:

Oh, don't say it. I said, "Please, please." Don't say the G word.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. So I spent a good minute saying, I, I'm honored by what I believe you're trying to express to me. At the same time, please, there is no such thing.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. And when we're, when we're writing your books, we're very aware of that. We're always doing things to take you down - Yeah. As much as we can.

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Mike Michalowicz:

I think people fall in this kind of compliance loop when they believe someone is almost like a s - a deity of some sort. It's, it's kind of the association I see people have. And then they start behaving consistently with that. Where that person says, "I shall do. " It says, "We're compliance." That's what I've observed.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. So Susan's, you know, some of that can get really toxic if the, um, if, especially if the so - called guru is, you know, taking advantage of that power dynamic. Yeah. Um, but, um, she's writing some beautiful stuff, some really important stuff that we need to hear about how we need to look at ourselves in that situation. Mm. So it's not incendiary against gurus. It's more about our own selves and how we show up in those situations. Um, so I'm really happy that she's working on that. Um, so she's an alum of my workshop and of my - Nice. Editing retreat. Nice. And she's one of the most brilliant writers, n - just naturally brilliant writing. And she got stuck. And

Mike Michalowicz:

S- So even the brilliant folks can get stuck.

AJ Harper:

We all get stuck. Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

Mike Michalowicz:

Absolutely. That's good to hear. That's reassuring.

AJ Harper:

Oh, I get stuck all the time. Yeah. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

Ditto. <laugh>

AJ Harper:

Yeah. So she, she had said, how do I know when it's time to put the book on pause? How do I know when it's time? And by pause, meaning I'm not gonna write. I'm gonna set the book aside and do something else. That's different than say, I'm gonna take the weekend off.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay.

AJ Harper:

Like, just so we're clear. It's, I'm gonna stop writing the book now.

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Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. So, so what is your initial response? What's your feel?

AJ Harper:

Well, okay. I, I'm super biased about this and, and, but this comes from d- decades of writing. So I hope people take it for, for what it is. But I, I also respect that there are different opinions, but I think there are some ti - I think the times to put things on pause actually aren't even about the writing itself. I think if life is happening in a way that very taking, taking things over, like there's a health issue. There's - mm-hmm. Um, a big loss. There's, um, maybe you need to really focus on revenue or your business or something because, you know, financially it's critical. Or, um, if your nervous system is completely shot, you know, that's -

Mike Michalowicz:

What would be an example of a nervous... Like how do you know your nervous system is shot?

AJ Harper:

Well, you know, it's when you're, um... Well, everybody's d- d - for me - Yeah, yeah. For me, it's if I'm just can't focus, kind of not sleeping well. Yeah, that's my indicator. Really, really rung out to angl - anxiety. Um, just feeling very not physically well.

Mike Michalowicz:

My indicator is when my, I have those racing thoughts that just don't stop and I can't sleep - Yeah. For consecutive nights. And I'm like, okay, this is now all consuming.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. So I feel like those are times when you might wanna put the book on pause to get those situations in hand. Maybe you need to deal with whatever issue in your life came up - mm-hmm. Because it's becoming difficult for you to write through that. And I, I used to be the type of person who would make myself write through it. Mm-hmm. But, uh, I try not to do that to myself now.

Mike Michalowicz:

What if though you're under a, a contractual agreement with your publisher to have some -

AJ Harper:

You just have to let them know.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, that, that always, that surprised me the first time you said it, and still kind of surprises me today. Uh, there's an agreement for a certain delivery date. And, um, I may have justifiable reasons I'm not delivering on it. Mm-hmm. But they're prepared for that it sounds like.

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AJ Harper:

Well, I mean, I think, I think it happens a lot. Yeah. Do you know what I mean? But what I think the right, the right decision then is to say, let me just talk to my editor. Yeah. Here's what's happening. Life happens. Yeah. Do you know what I mean? Yeah. Like it, we can't, we can't keep ignoring that. We have to sometimes make ad- adjustments and let that... So the, I think when you said earlier, didn't we do an episode like this? What we did want about is how to write through when life is happening. But this is about how do you make the decision to pause?

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, that's exactly right. That

AJ Harper:

Wasn't right. This is slightly different. But so I do think those things are warranted if you, if you need to take a break because for whatever reason, you know? Mm-hmm. Um - Is there - I'm thinking about, I was thinking about all in. Both of us were going through some really tough stuff.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um - Yeah, my dad was dying. Well, you were going through some life circumstances. Yeah.

AJ Harper:

But we, we wrote through that.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. I, I would dare say for me, part of it was actually very helpful of going through that because it was a distraction.

AJ Harper:

I'm that way too. I prefer to work. Work is how I kinda get, manage things.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah.

AJ Harper:

But, but I don't know, Mike, if that's always the healthiest. And it may

Mike Michalowicz:

C - may compromise the quality.

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AJ Harper:

It might. And I don't, I don't know if that tendency that both of us share, which again, I think is also very generational is suck it up. Yeah. Suck it up kind of thing. I don't know that that's the healthiest. Yeah. But that's the, again, not the main thing. Tho- those examples I think are okay if you wanna put on pause. But I think that what Susan was talking about was when is, when do you, when is it you feel, you feel stuck and then that's the cue to pause. And here's what I believe and other people might disagree with me. I don't think that that's the cue to pause. I don't think being stuck in the writing is a reason to pause.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. So let, let's unpack that a little bit. Being stuck in the writing though can manifest in many ways. I don't know what to write. I'm tired. I, because I remember you teaching, like, in the sprints, or at least referring to this, that even if you write just five words today - . You've made progress. And, and I, I've bought into that hook line and singer. And it's, it's right. So even when I'm stuck, I, I keep writing. And, and sometimes a miraculous moment happens, those five words become 15 and they become 100 and they become a 1500. So I kinda have this, you know, keep fighting through it mentality. So there's different forms of stuck, I think.

AJ Harper:

Well, I mean, I think in Susan's case, I think she was working through the direction of the book and I think she realized that her book was maybe bigger than she re - than she thought it was, which I will confess happens a lot to my students. Um, I do try and cultivate an environment where - Yeah. They realize that the book is more or layered or better or bigger or more significant because, you know, yeah man, let's, let's write that book. Um, in her case, I, but I, I, I think the question she wanted us to answer is how do you know when that feeling of this isn't, I'm not sure what to write next or I'm not feeling it. Is that the cue to pause? Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

And you're saying it's not.

AJ Harper:

It's not. It's interesting that you said you h- hear my voice even if you write 15 words, it's progress. Yeah. That's true. But it's actually not why I say that to continue to add to the word count. I say it because I want you to stay in writing season.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay, maybe I do understand the psychology behind it. Yeah. But the behavior, it works. It does keep you in writing season.

AJ Harper:

No, it does. Yeah. Because there's a thing that happens when we pull out when we do the pause. When we take the pause, especially when we haven't allowed our s - we, especially when it has

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no end. So you could say, "I'm gonna pause for the month of whatever." That would be one thing. But if you're pausing and who knows when you're gonna pick it back up again. You're in trouble.

Mike Michalowicz:

You know, I, I think it was Jerry Seinfeld who had a don't break that chain tracking system. And I think it was around joke writing that this could be totally wrong, but that he was writing jokes every morning and realized that if he stopped writing jokes that he'd go into potentially a downward spiral of not writing more jokes. Mm-hmm. So he marked on his calendar every day he wrote minimally say one or five jokes. I don't know what it was. Mm-hmm. And he put an X. And he said, "Don't break the chain. There always has to be an X - Yeah. On the map." Uh -

AJ Harper:

That's why I actually tell you that. Yeah. So I'm not, so I'm saying 50 words, five words, whatever. It doesn't matter. I always like to quote my dad, "It's not zero," is what he always used to say when I would say, "Oh, I didn't get this or this, you know, this isn't what I thought." He'd say, "Well, it's not zero." Um - Yeah, yeah, that's great. And I always tell that to my students. It's not zero. But I really don't even care. Yeah. I don't care if it's 100 words or a thousand words or whatever. It's not about continuing to make progress. But it's sort of my doorway in to get y'all to do it. Yeah. But what I really want is for you to not pause.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay.

AJ Harper:

Because what happens is it, you have put it in the drawer or off to the side and now you're no longer participating in the creation of the book. And when you are no longer participating in that, the world is not organizing around the creation anymore in your mind. You are onto other things. You are not going to notice what you need to notice. You're not gonna remember what you need to remember. Your brain is no longer sorting out what is this? How are we making this? What's the shape of this? It's not doing that anymore.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's brilliant.

AJ Harper:

And so I don't want that.

Mike Michalowicz:

But in Susan's case, are you advising her to pause? No. Oh, you're not? No. Do, do you ever think that... Well, you did share some circumstances where people should pause.

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AJ Harper:

Yeah. I think sometimes life is, is just bearing down hard on you and you might need to do it. In

Mike Michalowicz:

The case where you need to pause, do you set a timeframe of when you restart or do you wait for that to naturally present itself?

AJ Harper:

I think what you could do, what I, what I advised her to do was to pause certain kind of writing. Mm-hmm. So let's think about it like that. Instead of trying to muscle through outline, instead of trying to write the thing that is giving you fits, where's the energy? What's something that you could write that's you are excited to write? Oh, that's

Mike Michalowicz:

Interesting.

AJ Harper:

What's something that even if it's not in your outline at least relates to the book that you could write that you do feel okay writing? Because sometimes the issue is you're stuck because you've set this outline for yourself and then maybe it turns out actually that's not working for you. I got it.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um,

AJ Harper:

But you won't, maybe you're not sure what you should do next and the thought of creating a new outline is exhausting. I don't know. So then my, my go - to is always where are you feeling energy with this? What is interesting to you?

Mike Michalowicz:

What I noticed when I was attempting to write my first book all by myself was I'd start in the very beginning, uh meaning chapter one, word one, and start working through it. And then I would s - pause temporarily at one spot, say it was halfway through chapter two and go back to chapter one to improve it. And I kept on improving the beginning. And the, the long tail of the book, the majority of the book was never being addressed at all. Um, but what I'm hearing now is if you're stuck in one spot and you, you, you think you might hit a pause, really maybe the opportunity is to jump to a new section, to move to a new part of the outline.

AJ Harper:

So yeah, that's always, I always advise that. Okay. But this was more, I mean, I didn't, this is

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even, maybe it's not even in the book. That's what I'm trying to say.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, I see. So it could be another book.

AJ Harper:

No. I think what is rela - what is on theme? What is something that is - I see.

Mike Michalowicz:

I see.

AJ Harper:

Related in some way, but you don't know where it goes and you're gonna let yourself be okay with that. I'm gonna write this. I don't know if I'm even gonna use it. I

Mike Michalowicz:

I see. Okay.

AJ Harper:

But it is on the book. It is on the topic of the book, the problem that you're addressing in the book. It's, um, stories that may or may not go in the book, but you feel I, I can write that. I'm interested in that. It's just to keep you in writing season. And what you might discover is that you needed to pause the other writing you were doing, but now you're gonna shift to something else, but it's still the book. You're not giving up on the book or pausing the book.

Mike Michalowicz:

I experienced this in a very kinda small microcosm event. So when we were working on The Money Habit, which by the way, for our audience, there's two books I think that work perfectly in concert. <laugh> Write a Must Read and The Money Habit. So write a book that transforms not just your readers, but yourself and also make some money while you're doing it and manage that money properly. So get those two books. But when I was writing The Money Habit, I was writing a story and it was about an instant famine that came upon a town in the Midwest. Some dust storm came about and it was from over Forestation and this dust storm came and it wiped out of town literally overnight. And so of the population, which was very small, say a couple hundred residents, 198 ran for the hills and two stayed. And it was a story about the two that stayed.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um, and what I was trying to liken [sic] that to is when you hit a financial downturn, sometimes it can be so sudden, do you run or do you stay? And, uh, ultimately it wasn't a fit for the book. Actually, it didn't even make it to the lost chapters. I don't know. I gotta find out where I put it, but I didn't get into the lost chapters, so I'm gonna reinsert that lost content at some point.

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AJ Harper:

I don't even remember that.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, You nixed it. You're like. You scratched it out. But -

AJ Harper:

Oh, because we didn't even put... It never made it in a draft. That's why it's not in lost content.

Mike Michalowicz:

Not even a dr - that's right. I said, Hey, here's a story I wrote that think might work. And you said, no, it doesn't work. <laugh> Which, which was actually great. 'Cause I, I, when I was writing that, I w - I was getting tired of writing. And now this is a microcosm. This is like, you know, I was in this massive sprint writing 12 hour days. But I was like, I'm getting exhausted. I'm exhausted now of writing this certain thing. I just wanna write something different. I found a story and it was fun. Yeah. Yeah. It took me a couple hours, but it was fun.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. That's what I'm talking about is, can you find something fun? Can you break out? Can you give yourself a, a, a break from the track you're on? Yeah. But still write something that seems like it's maybe related. And then just let it go, you know? Let it go if the, the advice I gave her was she was really into working on her stories and - Yeah. Like go with that. Write, write about, write these stories. Write about your experiences. Maybe, maybe you're gonna use them, maybe you're not. Maybe you're gonna end up using this little section of them. That's okay. All that's fine. I think one of the things I find myself repeating with students over and over is, um, permission to explore something and have it not actually be used.

Mike Michalowicz:

I, I love that. And

AJ Harper:

We're in such a society now where everything is productivity. Everything has to work. But it's the process. Being stuck is part of the process. And actually by continuing and not pausing, you give, you will actually get to some really good stuff. Yes. Um, so I'm not, I'm actually not for the pause. If the pause for artistic reasons, that's an inner critic troll. That's your, that's your inner critic troll saying maybe the best thing to do would be to pause right now. Sounds really reasonable. Sounds like a good idea. It's BS. It's 100% BS and it's dangerous.

Mike Michalowicz:

It is dangerous. Yeah. It reminds me of a story that's kind of riffing, doing things you like or just

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want to do just for the fun of it. Uh, Dave Groll or David Groll of Foo Fighters. Yep.

AJ Harper:

Mm-hmm.

Mike Michalowicz:

So he wrote some -

AJ Harper:

Formerly of Nirvana.

Mike Michalowicz:

Right. He was the drummer for Nirvana. So he wrote a song called Everlong for the Foo Fighters. Well, how the song came about has this really rhythmic guitar sound. Kind of thing. And, um, he shared that he was in a sound booth. So they were recording a different song and at the stage of the recording, each musician does a performance and the other musicians are put into a silent area. So he's just sitting there, he's got his guitar in hand and he's watching the other musicians fill their parts, which is now, you know, consecutively maybe a half hour. So he's just filling around his guitar and he hits this chord. So what he likes to say is he's not a trained musician. He doesn't know how to read music. He doesn't know how to write music in the traditional sense. So he just kind of fills around.

Mike Michalowicz:

And so during this filling around, he found this really unique sound in chord. And now it becomes this like massively big hit song. I wonder if, I wonder if this is also maybe your inner spirit saying, "Hey, there's something else out there. Just start experimenting." And maybe you stumble across this great thing that can redefine your book or be an extraordinary story or, or maybe spawn something new. But I think it's also an opportunity. Is it, it's not just like, you know, uh, I feel overwhelmed. This is too hard. I wanna take a pause. I'm exhausted. I wonder if that's also sensation of, hey, maybe there's something else right now in the moment that you can grab onto that's gonna re-inspire you.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I just, I think it's so... I just wish people would trust themselves a little bit more.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, that's a good way of saying it. You

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AJ Harper:

Know? Just because I don't know. I don't know how it's gonna shake out.

Mike Michalowicz:

You, you tell people get a writing prescription. What's

AJ Harper:

That? Oh, this is just something... It's the same thing we said earlier. 15 more... So what I tell people is - Okay. But I, I actually set the, set the prescription. I, I call it a prescription because it's like taking your vitamin D or your whatever that you have to take every day. I gotta get my 50 words. No matter what, I'm doing my 50 words. I think 50's a good, very basic because that's basically like two sentences. Mm-hmm. Or one long one. <laugh> Yeah. And you could do it on your notes app, you can do it, you can just do it in your car, you can do it in line. And to just keep that going. But I, the, I think what that's, that's more like keeping things alive when life is hard. I think when you feel the urge to pause the book, that you need to actually lean way into it.

AJ Harper:

Mm. And that's why I'm saying, find the thing that it is lighting you up related to it, but some part of you is saying, "Well, I don't know if that's, can I use it? Am, is it gonna take me down the wrong direction?" It, it doesn't actually matter. It doesn't actually matter. And I, I think this is the part that's hard for people to understand that it all ends up becoming important in the end. And it's not for you to know right now. The pause though is, is, can be very dangerous.

Mike Michalowicz:

You shared some other things to do, uh, outside of writing alone. Yeah. So what are some things you could do?

AJ Harper:

Well, if you really feel like I, I'm so stuck I can't write another word, then maybe it's time to interview. Get interview for the book. So again, keep everything related to the book. Um, you're not writing, but you're having conversations. It might light you up and give you an idea. Um, maybe you need to, um, do a test drive. You've got some sort of framework or process or steps or exercises. Get some people, gather them, see, see what, see if they, it's working, get their feedback. Um, gather people into a focus group, have people come. I had one student. I had her, um, just create, I think, I think we came up with about six reflection questions related to her book. And I had her invite people to her house who were her ideal reader and have, and then record this living room conversation where they just asked the six questions.

AJ Harper:

I don't even know if she got to all six. Hmm. But it was enough to start to see, oh, this is what people wanna talk about. So there's so many things you could be doing so you're not actually

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pausing, even if you're not writing writing.

Mike Michalowicz:

You s - uh, at your Madeline Island vacation home, uh, if I remember correctly, it's a troll. I wanna say it's gold color or something.

AJ Harper:

It's king troll.

Mike Michalowicz:

On, on a

AJ Harper:

Pedestal. That's my king troll.

Mike Michalowicz:

And so you were saying - He's

AJ Harper:

Got, he's got a little gold thing in his belly. Yeah. And he has gold hair. Yeah, lots of gold. Yeah. I got him on Etsy.

Mike Michalowicz:

He's great. He's awesome. Yeah. And so when I was reading this, I wanna read your, this is your sentence. Yeah. So I want you to find, I was, he came to mind. You wrote, "The truth is the feeling or that feeling of being stuck is really hardcore troll issues."

AJ Harper:

Yes. That's what, that's what's really happening.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Give me a little more detail

AJ Harper:

On that. Okay. So well, if you, in write a must read, I tell the story. So I don't know. Do you remember this story?

Mike Michalowicz:

Start it out and then I'll see.

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AJ Harper:

Okay. So back in the day when I was, uh, honestly, I think I was 18 maybe. I don't even remember the exact age, but I had one of those old school trolls from the 80s with the orange hair.

Mike Michalowicz:

The one you put on the pencil?

AJ Harper:

Yeah, but this was a bigger one. A bigger one. Okay. Yeah, like four inches or whatever. And I somehow had this presence of mine. I was like, "That, I'm gonna put that on my desk. And that represents that whatever noise in my head that says you suck." Right? And I knew to do it and I would write him, I would write him, put, stand him up on my desk when I was sitting to write. And then sometimes I would do mean things to him. <laugh> Like what? Put him in the, throw him in the garbage, throw him against the wall. A poor guy. Knock him over. But it was just like this act of like, I see you, you're not in charge. I'm writing today. But then I also had the presence of mind to write him back up again because I knew it wasn't over.

Mike Michalowicz:

And it never will be.

AJ Harper:

This was way before Steve Pressfield wrote The War of Art. And he wrote The War of Art and he taught me the thing that absolutely changed everything for me. Absolutely would not be sitting here today without it. Where he said, he calls it resistance. I call it an inner critic troll. He says, "Resistance is a law of nature like gravity, which means you don't fix it. You never kill it. " So now I tell my students that inner critic troll is messing with you and they're zombies. Meaning you can battle them one day, but then the next day they're back Because you can't kill them. Which is my version of resistance is like gravity. And I talk about this in the book and I told this to Steve Pressfield too. I said, "I think I knew this because I kept putting him back.

AJ Harper:

Like we will fi - we will fight it. See you tomorrow where we duel again." <laugh> And he thought that was so interesting. He's like, "Yeah, I think you did know that. " But I couldn't put, I couldn't put a name to it. I didn't fully understand until I read the War of Art. And I, I think that when you are feeling like it's time to put the book on pause, they're really getting the better of you. Yeah. The trolls are really, they're close to winning.

Mike Michalowicz:

Is that king troll, gold color, massive, big one there?

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AJ Harper:

Oh, I have trolls everywhere. I have a jar full of 200 of the baby trolls.

Mike Michalowicz:

Are you knocking them over still? Um - Or calling them out somewhere?

AJ Harper:

I do. Like right now I've got them in jar, in a big jar. Yeah. I keep them on my desk. So great. But, um, I really, for me, more, more now, it's, it's like, it's funny. Like I wanna make it comical. I like that it's a troll. I like that it's silly. My students are always showing me all their trolls they get. Mm-hmm. Um, I just had one the other day dig... She went in her basement. She was really struggling and found an old Norwegian, like old school troll. Wooden. Like I was like, "Okay, you are committed." Wearing clogs. Yeah. Yeah. But I think what it is, is it's like takes, um, takes the severity, takes the seriousness out of it. Yeah. Because this is the reality. This is what it's like when you make something. They come, they come along with it.

AJ Harper:

And it's the point. Yeah. Like you ha - you, part of your battle as an artist is to battle them, those inner critic trolls. And so why not make it silly and weird and l- less stressful for you? But I think that if you're really feeling like I gotta pause this, maybe It's time. Maybe I need to just need to do that. They have, they are close to winning. And so when a student says that to me, I will, I'm like, I'm, I, whatever I have to do. Do you need my phone number? No, seriously, because I'm like, we're close to losing you. What can happen when you pause like that and you give into it is you'll tell yourself it's temporary and then the days turn into weeks and the weeks turn into months and the months turn into years and somewhere along the way you might tell yourself, um, I, oh, you know, that was a good idea, but I wasn't really meant to do that.

AJ Harper:

And I will do anything to get you, pull you back into it and keep you writing. And I will say, um, some of the stuff that Susan's been writing is just like, I just - Gold. I can't write like her. She's, uh -

Mike Michalowicz:

And gosh, we need that book.

AJ Harper:

Oh, we s - we s - desperately need it.

Mike Michalowicz:

I've never heard of a book on that subject.

AJ Harper:

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She, way too, uh - We need it. You, you, it'll blow your mind. Um, but also like, what, what, what were we losing? Yeah. You know, and she'd been writing some gorgeous stuff. I don't know how it's all gonna fit. It doesn't matter, you know? Oh God, I wish I... If there's anything I wish I could get listeners to do is to just accept the fact that it's going to get there. Mm-hmm. You know, you, that -

Mike Michalowicz:

Just keep going.

AJ Harper:

Y- you're going, it's going to be a book. It's going to be a book. So, but it, I can't... If I could just wave a magic wand and just make people trust themselves. Yeah. But the, the ne - the urge to pause, if it's not related to an issue that's happening -

Mike Michalowicz:

Life's events of significance.

AJ Harper:

That's like a warning. It's like danger Will Robinson. It's like me, beep, beep. Seriously. Yeah. You've been, the, you remember the clocks would - I do. Be like 30 seconds. Yeah. Yeah, that's where we're at, you know? Excuse my poor grammar just now. Oh,

Mike Michalowicz:

I know. I totally get it.

AJ Harper:

That's, that's, that's a danger sign if you're thinking that.

Mike Michalowicz:

I was watching... I don't know why. He's talking about poor grammar, total aside. I was watching Arrested Development again, like the reruns.

AJ Harper:

You know, I've never watched a full episode of it.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, brilliant. Probably one of the best written shows I've ever seen. And, um, Buster, who's one of the kids in the family, they're all dysfunctional. Um, he, he, he, his character is, is very much a mama's boy and, um, you know, somewhere in the spectrum type of thing. But at times he'll have like this, these very lucid moments. So, uh, his brother goes to him and says, "Did you talk to the cops?" And he goes, "I talked to no blue." <laugh> And then he goes back to his, like, weirdness. It was so funny. All right. Um, here's what you need to do if you're listening to the show. You gotta get write a must read. You must visit ajharper.com. 'Cause all these things you're talking

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about are what your students are going through. You help them navigate this. Yeah. You wave a magic wand, you give them your cell number.

AJ Harper:

I have no magic wand.

Mike Michalowicz:

Well, you give them your cell number, that's the magic wand. I

AJ Harper:

Don't give... Please don't ask me for my cell number.

Mike Michalowicz:

But you do these extraordinary things for your - I, I

AJ Harper:

Will, yes.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Yeah, don't ask. But you do do extraordinary things for your readers. You show up in extreme ways at odd hours. You do whatever it is. I shouldn't say readers, for your writers.

AJ Harper:

For your - Yeah, people in my community.

Mike Michalowicz:

Mm-hmm. Yeah. So that is the magic wand, if I may. Um, you as a listener to the show, please go to dwtbpodcast.com to get resources. But the biggest thing is please subscribe to the show and give us an honest rating and review. It helps us tremendously. And, uh, make sure you get Write a Must Read. That is the book that defines all of what we're talking about. Last thing is you can email us at hello@dwtbpodcast.com. Adela, our producer of the show is watching that. And if you have a question, if you have comments, something you wanna share, we wanna put on this next upcoming episode. So email us there. And the last thing, AJ knows it, I know it. Do you know it? Don't write that book. Write the greatest book you can.