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How to Avoid Self Sabotage

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: *This free bloggyletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training in suburban Philadelphia. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley recently began work on her eighth book, a poignant yet humorous memoir called "Offline." She's trying hard to avoid self sabotage.*

Ever since Susan Boyle burst into international headlines a few months ago with her angelic voice, I have been worrying about her. Sound crazy? You bet. Yet, as news media everywhere virtually salivated about the incredible career awaiting the 40-something Scottish songbird warbling all over the Internet, I perceived a less glorious result. In my opinion, Boyle was a classic candidate for major self-sabotage. After spending her whole life in the same modest home with her parents, who are now deceased, Boyle quite clearly was horrifyingly ill-prepared to jump suddenly into a much higher echelon of British life.

Contrary to popular opinion, the vast majority of lower-class men and women remain in the same income and social level to which they were born. One reason, of course, is upper classes' sometimes subtle but real maneuvers to maintain the exclusivity of their country clubs and private schools. But an equally powerful force is an individual's own discomfort with success. The single most powerful counterforce appears to be an especially supportive and educated parent as evidenced in the case of President Barack Obama.

You may be wondering why I feel so strongly about Boyle's predicament. It's because, years ago, I went through a similar experience to hers, though on a much smaller scale. Call it projection, which of course it is, but here comes my tale.

Whereas Boyle's penetrating voice thrust her into a new social sphere, my high academic scores did it for me. Because I tested well on standardized tests in high school, I won a scholarship to a private, four-year university 300 miles from home. When I got there one hot August day for orientation, I was shell-shocked by the disparity between me and other students. Their fathers were doctors and lawyers. Mine was a blue-collar worker. Their clothes came from chic boutiques in New York City. Mine came from stores far outside Manhattan. Their conversations focused on weekend parties. Mine focused on lonely weekends. Can you say maladjusted?

I was so out of my element that, after a single year, I abandoned my scholarship – worth thousands of dollars -- and fled home. And I mean fled. I then began working my way through a public university where I felt less angst. In effect, I stupidly threw away my first opportunity for upward mobility. My parents, who were loving but uneducated immigrants, lacked the insight to encourage me to stretch beyond my humble beginnings. In fact, they were perceptively relieved when I returned to the safety of home.

Having rigorously examined my life in years since, I realize now that my give-up behavior was totally predictable. Contrary to the opinions of successful people concerned about lower classes invading their turf, the vast majority of human beings are subconsciously driven to stay in their original stations in life. According to social mobility expert Pierre Bourdieu, 42 percent of men and women born to lower class parents remain right there. Only six percent make it to the upper stratum of jobs and income. The people in between usually move up one class at most.



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The good news, according to research I've done during the past three decades, is that you can train yourself and your loved ones to stop twisting opportunity into failure, often without even realizing it. Here are some ideas:

Prepare yourself. Believe it or not, I arrived at the first day of college without ever having seen the campus. I was shell-shocked by its intimidating size. The more you become familiar with a new job or a new neighborhood before making the leap, the less anxiety you'll feel. One simple tip: never, ever, ever start at a company without casing out in advance your new route to work, the layout of the parking lot, the attire of other employees, and the security procedures at the front door.

Take small steps. If you want a career as a stand-up comic, I suggest you practice with small groups of friends in small bars in Kennett Square or Elverson. If you try to perform for the first time at the famous Improv in Los Angeles, I guarantee you're going to choke big time. The probable result is that you'll never climb back on stage.

Accept discomfort. It's normal. I recently read an article that said that most people need two years to acclimate themselves to something so seemingly benign as a new neighborhood. If you've going from a row house in Philadelphia to an estate in Berwyn, the adjustment will take even longer.

Refuse to beat yourself up. When thrust into circumstances envied by others, you may feel guilty about revealing your distress. How can you feel so upset, after all, when you just married the best partner on earth? Here's an explanation: The early days of wedlock rank in the top-10 most stressful events of life, according to a famous study by psychologist Hans Selye.

Find trustworthy advisors. I'm unsure that the rough-and-tumble TV impresario Simon Cowell was the right mentor for Boyle. He stood to make millions of dollars if she succeeded on the grueling recording and touring schedule mapped out by him and his cronies. Whose interests did these music moguls really have at heart?

Keep existing connections. When you're on the threshold of change, avoid throwing out your old buddies and routines. They can give you stability in turbulent times. I honestly think the need for people who-knew-you-when explains why many actors and musicians travel with much maligned posses of close personal friends. Entourage, anyone?

Stick it out. Considering that life is one colossal change after another, you stand to gain confidence and flexibility every time you face, rather than run from, an unpleasant situation. Oh, that I had known that truth at age 17. A relevant quote from Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States: "When you reach the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on." Between now and then, of course, I recommend that you call someone with naval experience. Why? To learn, before you're dangling in the wind, how to tie the darn knot.

Dr. Kathleen Begley has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody.