



“There are times when it’s best to really think your way through it, and there are times when it’s best that you don’t know where you’re going.”
— Lou Berney*

Dear Faithful Reader,

When I was a teenager I dropped out of high school to lead an effort with some friends to start our own high school. Changes, Inc. (as we named it) ran for a good decade; we even sent our graduates to places like Harvard and Yale. On my diploma, hand-calligraphed by one of my best friends, was this school slogan:

“We did not know what to expect upon the open road, but we started here.”

My father, the PhD and college professor, found this amusing and quietly shared with me his own translation:

“We didn’t know what the hell we were doing, but we did it anyway.”

In the nineties, when *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* was still fresh off the press and Tony Robbins was just starting out, goal-setting was a very big deal, especially in personal development circles. Those who led motivational talks, trainings, workshops and seminars often cited a famous Harvard study, which polled a graduating class of its storied Business School at graduation and again ten years later.

Their findings? Only 3 percent of that entire class had clearly articulated, written-down goals — and a decade later, those 3 percent were collectively out-earning the entire other 97 percent, the ones who had not started out with written goals, *by a factor of ten*.

Astonishing! Except that this “famous” study was never actually conducted at Harvard. Nor at Yale. In fact, nowhere.

Because no such study exists.

And you know what? I’m relieved to know that.

I’ve always been an ambitious person. I love big dreams and outsize aspirations. I love living every day with the unshakable conviction that hugely fulfilling achievements are possible.

It's when we convert those driving desires into concretized goals that I start to get a little leery.

Goals can become obsessions, in a constricting, blinkering way that dreams do not. I admire that original Lexus slogan, "The relentless pursuit of perfection." But perfection is an aspiration — not a concrete goal. The relentless pursuit of a specific, quantified, mapped-out objective is predicated on the assumption that I clearly know what I want, that I know what would be best for me.

It doesn't leave room for what I don't know. It doesn't leave room for all the cracks and gaps of my self-ignorance — gaps waiting patiently to be filled by the collective wisdom of forces in the world around me.

When I tabulate a list of all the pivotal events in my life that have been most positively life-changing — such as meeting my wife-to-be Ana, or being asked by my friend Bob Burg to write a little parable with him — I find one blazingly obvious characteristic in common: not one of them came about as a result of my plan.

None was a "goal." (In your face, imaginary Harvard study!)

There's a passage in *Blind Fear* (#3 in my thriller trilogy). Tomás, a Puerto Rican Navy SEAL, is showing a few teammates around his homeland. When he takes them inside a soaring marble cathedral, one teammate comments, "How come they always build these old cathedrals with all that freakin' wasted empty space up top?"

"To leave room for God, moron," Tomás replies.

So let's put it this way: I believe in goals. Big goals, goals that take your breath away. I just think that when we frame them, we need to acknowledge the limitations of our own ignorance and allow for the wisdom of unplanned events acting on our behalf.

Our plans, you might say, need a lot of empty space to make room for God.

My March wish for you: that you take a few moments every day to reflect on those unplanned pivotal events that have shaped your life for the better, and remind yourself to keep lots of empty space in whatever cathedrals you are building.



*** ABOUT THE WRITER**

Lou Berney is one of my favorite living writers — but he didn't start out that way.

I remember reading his first two novels, *Gutshot Straight* and *Whiplash River*, about a fast-talking private eye named Shake Bouchon. I enjoyed them both; they were smart,

funny, fast-moving, incredibly inventive, and both possessed a striking sense of place (the first was set in Panama, the second in Egypt). They were good. But they didn't seem especially . . . I don't know, *memorable*.

Then I read his third novel, *The Long and Faraway Gone* (2015) — and I still remember putting the book down and saying, out loud to my empty office, “What the hell *happened* to that guy!” Because this book wasn't just good; it was stunning. More serious, sober, dark than the others. It felt like it had all the same skill, but with fathoms and furlongs more depth.

Then came novel #4, *November Road* (2018), which rocked my world. Followed by last year's *Dark Ride*, which was one of those rare books I would call life-changing. Yes, it is that good.

So back to my spontaneously uttered question. What the hell happened to that guy?

Short answer: a lot of failure.

Lou started out, in his native Oklahoma City, as an early success story. Learned to read and write by age 3, loved writing as a kid, had a short story published in *The New Yorker* at age 24. Had a book of short stories out the following year and it got great reviews. “Hey, this is kind of easy,” he thought. “This is gonna be fun.”

And then it wasn't. He spent the next five years writing a novel, a huge sprawling thing that spanned multiple centuries. Every publishing house rejected it. Then he wrote another (this one took just three years), and then another — both rejected.

Three novels, zero takers. A resounding dead end.

He moved to Hollywood and spent some years screenwriting, until the 2007 writers' strike shut down that income stream. At the same time, he got the news that his father's health was fast declining. Returned to Oklahoma City to teach writing and care for his dad. Meanwhile, his own writing career had more or less hit bottom.

And then he wrote another novel — the one that turned out to be that 2015 hit *The Long and Faraway Gone* — which won the Edgar, Anthony, Barry, Macavity, and ALA awards (and blew this writer's mind). Followed three years later by *November Road*, which was named “best book of the year” on a ton of lists (CBS called it “one of the best books of the decade”!) and won a Barry, a Macavity, an Anthony, the Hammett Prize, the Left Coast Crime “Lefty” Award for Best Mystery Novel, the Oklahoma Book Award for Best Fiction Novel, and the CWA Ian Fleming Steel Dagger award for Best Thriller Novel.

Wait, though. The story's not over yet.

After the phenomenal success of *November Road* came . . . silence. Months rolled by, then years. Five years later, there was still no new Lou Berney book out. What was happening? As Berney reports it:

I spent two and a half years working on a novel that wasn't working. I was under some pretty extreme pressure. I felt like I was letting my publisher down, letting everybody down. It was tough. Sometimes things work and sometimes they don't. You have to know when to pull the trigger and move on.

In early 2020 he finally gave in, pulled the plug on his abortive novel, and pronounced it dead. Which left him back in that hole of no-confidence. As he says:

It's a terrible feeling to feel like you're bad at the one thing you're good at.

Feeling like an incompetent failure, he decided to write a main character who was an incompetent failure. And thus was born Hardy Reed, the twenty-something stoner at the heart of *Dark Ride* who goes by "Hardly" and is one of the most unlikely, memorable heroes I've ever read.

Hearing the story of this long and winding path to success, one can't help wondering, is it worth it, all that failure and struggle and rejection?

But it is. Of course it is.

One of my favorite Lou Berney lines, not from any of his books but from an interview, speaks to that point, with the best answer I've ever heard to the question, "Why write?"

The act of writing fiction for me is just the best feeling in the world. It makes me feel human. When I'm writing, I'm as permeable to everything in the world as I'll ever be.

Amen to that, and write on.

Missing past issues of *Mann's Search for Meaning*? You can find them all [RIGHT HERE](#).