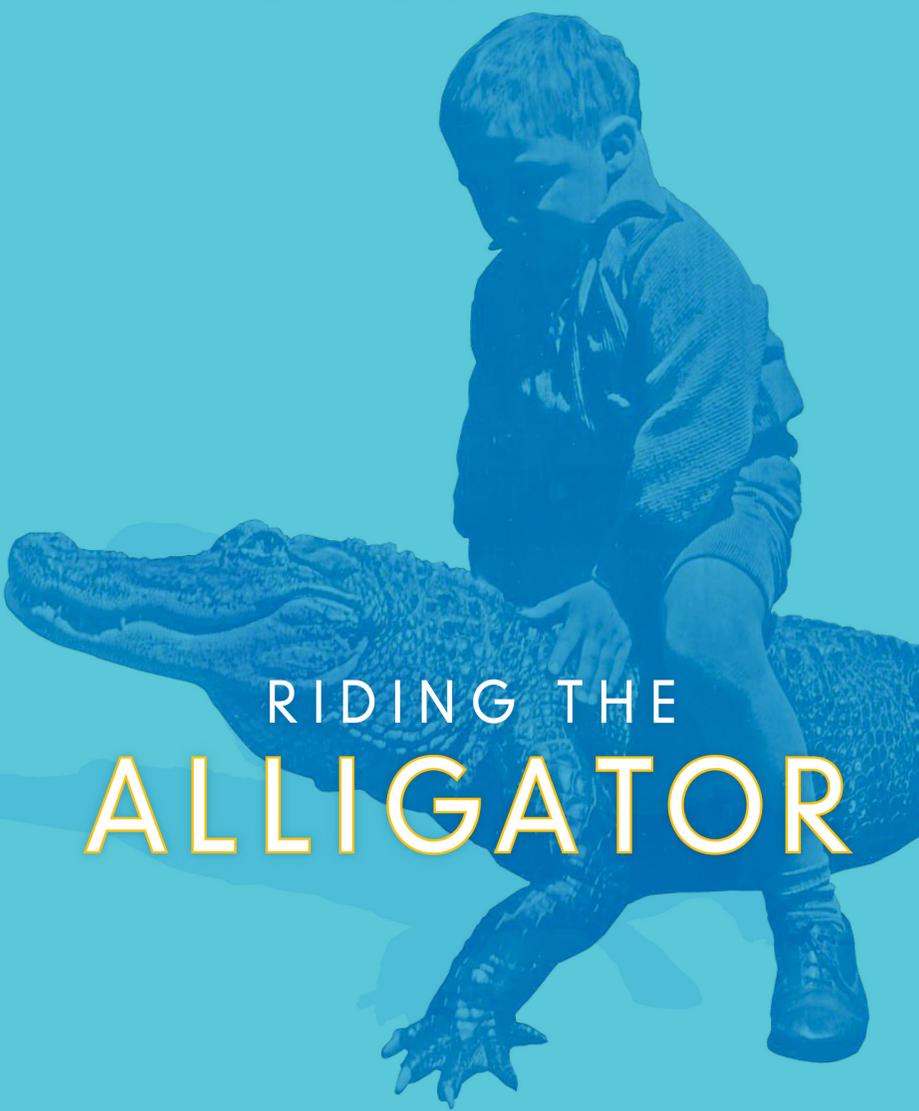


PEN DENSHAM

A young boy with short hair, wearing a dark sweater and a tie, is sitting on the back of a large alligator. The alligator is facing left. The entire scene is overlaid on a teal background. The boy's hands are resting on the alligator's back.

RIDING THE  
**ALLIGATOR**

strategies for a career in screenplay writing  
(and **NOT** getting eaten)



*Chapter* **3**

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**WE ALL  
HAVE DOUBTS**

*Imagination is more important than knowledge. For while knowledge defines all we currently know and understand, imagination points to all we might yet discover and create.*

— Albert Einstein



## YES, BUT CAN I WRITE?

This chapter hopes to journey you to the most illogical and wonderful places in yourself. And it won't always make sense.

There are no experts on how *you* should be creative. In fact, my first rule is: Ignore everything I or anyone else says that might impede your natural process and inhibit your courage to create. What works for one might disable another's inspirational process.

Human experience is unknowably vast. There is *no good reason* that your viewpoint should not be artistically valid and deserve to be shared with others.

Our geographical place in this world — our nature, our myriad cultures, our spiritual beliefs, our life experiences, our families, the accumulated data we have discovered in all the fields of our existence (and the discoveries we are yet to make) — mean that we each consist of unique oceans of information, facts, rules, emotions, instincts, and prejudices. We creators swim in these vast, unconscious depths inside ourselves.

No other human has been socialized, educated, or conditioned to experience their lives identically to us. From our individual

perceptions, life paths, and genetic instincts comes the indisputable logic: *What we think, and what we have to say, is distinctive.*

## EACH OF US IS LIKE A UNIQUE HUMAN INSTRUMENT

We may doubt our creativity only because we have not found the kind of “music” we are destined to excel at. Simplistically, if you are a violin, no matter how much those who influence you try to force you to sound like a bass drum, it isn’t going to sound right or bring you any satisfaction. It will cause you to lose faith in your creative value.

I believe the true joy is to find what instrument you are through experimentation, and then give yourself to playing that instrument in relationship to your natural talent.

I encourage you to see yourself as a composer of your life thoughts. They don’t have to be accurate, correct, in style, obviously salable, or even acceptable. Define yourself by creating from who *you* are.

- ▶ This is also called having a “voice,” a distinctive and resonant character to your work.
- ▶ Creativity is a magical and shamanistic thing.
- ▶ Creativity should not have rules, but here is one: Be daring!
- ▶ And here is another: Be patient and forgiving of yourself.

Great ideas don’t always come with a thunder strike. In their early formation, creative concepts are often wispy, ethereal thoughts that barely stop in the brain. They come at inconvenient times and often in puzzle pieces that feel valuable, but you don’t know why yet.

New ideas are like small children; we need to encourage them, nurture them, help them to walk, talk, and to grow.

It is best to share them only with people who have an understanding and supportive nature. I call these people “story midwives.” They have grace and a positive ability to provoke you to keep going. I try to avoid people who are less insightful and more dogmatic during early formative stages. I have allowed myself to be discouraged by sharing with people who do not comprehend my goals or who have a different agenda, and I have allowed myself to quit on projects.

### **THE SHIP IN THE DOCK**

The maturation of a creative concept is frequently not a straight line. In fact, we often depress ourselves when we look at what others have accomplished. Their script, book, movie, or sculpture *seems so complete and certain*.

But what we see is the end result of their voyage. We have no idea how long it took to get there: the storms, the lost cargo, the cargo that sank and had to be re-floated! We can be unfairly hard on ourselves when we compare that finished creation with the vague little spirits of ideas that we are trying to piece together.

The process of capturing your ideas and forming them can be intensely personal, frequently daunting, and seeded with doubt and guilt. “I’m wasting my time.” “This is stupid.” “It will never work.”

I have only one answer regarding the creative process.

### **JUST DO IT**

We humans are drawn to track events in our daily lives and the media: our work, the weather, news, celebrities’ lives, our loves, illnesses, rivals. When these experiences change, we often have an innate desire to share these changes with

others verbally through gossip, conversation, or a rant! For some reason, our brains often impose a sense of order on these events; it seems to be in our nature to see life events as linked. We are all designed to tell stories.

It may be a survival mechanism, but these instinctually imposed patterns are a bonus. I've noticed that almost any sequence of events, written down, seems to work towards constructing itself into a story in our minds. The listeners or readers do half the job by bringing their own patterning instincts to help.

When writing, we frequently discover our story in a jumble of ideas and have to be patient with ourselves as we piece and discard what we intuitively feel. We should not get scared; I have often found in a script that even just jamming events together leads to some kind of sense. Nature's story force is with you.

No one can play a chess game without moving pieces on the board. Once you get into the process, have faith that more ideas and solutions will keep coming to help you gain traction.

I call my first attempt at idea creation the Lewis and Clark (named for the first two men to explore across America to the Pacific). It's a brave voyage up the Mississippi into the unknown. We must allow ourselves a few wrong tributaries, some incorrect roads, rough mountain paths, and some testing obstacles. This is all normal. It's nuts to berate ourselves as bad navigators when we don't know where we are going until we've discovered it.

When inventing the lightbulb, Thomas Edison said, as he went through more than four thousand variations, that he "*ached to give it all up.*"

Creativity is work. It would be misleading to say that stress and doubt are not normal. But it also can be fun, rewarding, and truly intoxicating at times.

I believe that creativity and anxiety are similar parts of our nature. Strangely, our bodies can interpret both processes with the same physiological reaction. But artists who see their paths as challenging and adventurous look forward to the experience. The ones who interpret their journey as fearful and uncertain get creeped-out.

Try to see your writing expedition as adventure, imaginary play. Surrender to your instincts. The ideas will flow more easily.

But don't expect it to be too easy. It is a gift when it is.

### **WHERE DO IDEAS COME FROM?**

When we converse with other people, we don't actually know what we are going to say. Rather, we discover it as we deliver the words. Or sometimes we pre-verbalize a thought in the conscious part of our brain and try to hold it in our memory until we can use it or record it.

These are acts of creativity, ideas ready to be used.

What happens when we say we "are going to think about something"? We place a concept in our mind and wait for it to pop out again, changed. It's like it's tossed beneath the waters of our consciousness into a deep, unviewable sea. Occasionally it will surface on a wave in our brain only to vanish again. Then, sometimes it seems to land on a mental beach, with each wave bringing in a greater bounty of ideas or solutions.

When we create, we encourage a dialogue with our subconscious. Sometimes the output can make us feel as if we are channeling, almost as if taking dictation from within. Other times we will collect odds and ends of ideas and then try to piece them together. There is no wrong way.

I live with Post-It notes near at hand. I write up files of my uncensored ideational bric-a-brac. I have discovered that some story ideas never complete themselves. Others come

out in a torrent. And some sit in my files calling to me, but are not yet ripe.

I have read, from cover to cover, books like the Leonard Maltin Movie Guide, which contains thousands of plot, character, and movie ideas. I encourage my brain to try to mix these themes together in the hope that my mind will meld a new form. This process is called “bi-association,” the joining together of two old forms to create a new one.

*Jaws* in outer space? This is a bi-association that could be called *Alien*. Dinosaurs in modern America? You could call this *Jurassic Park*. *Star Wars* is akin to *Robin Hood* in the future. What about *Casablanca* on Mars?

The story for *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* started in my idea files as “Robin Hood — Raider’s Style.” It was there for some time before the concept of framing the story around a Muslim hero and a Christian Robin Hood working together against an evil force solidified my creative direction. I think my vision for stories changed after my wife and I had a son. The idea of an altruistic champion appealed, someone who learned to fight for the future of other people’s children. There is a cesarean birth scene in the movie, influenced by my wife, Wendy, experiencing the same process with our child.

I define my altruistic heroes as the “makers of life.” They are defenders, people who find the will and courage to fight for others; they are willing to die to make other people safer. An excellent example is a fireman (like in our movie *Backdraft*, which Ron Howard beautifully directed). Firemen are as action-oriented as any hero, but do no harm, as opposed to killer protagonists that use violence as a solution to their own problems, whom I define as the “takers of life.” These action-oriented characters wipe hundreds of humans off the screen and then stand with a smoking gun and a foot on a corpse, and we are supposed to celebrate the bloody mayhem that was unleashed for their selfish goals.

But, if you want to write a movie that venerates a killer, as I said, ignore my rules. It's not in me to write a movie like *Saw*, especially after having raised children. But there is a great tradition in the human arts of exploring the darkest, the most sexual and sadistic, sides of human nature in an effort to contribute more fully to human understanding. These stories can operate like adult fairy tales delving into our psychology. Heck, even Sophocles had Oedipus rip his eyes out to illustrate his madness.

After finishing my first solo directing project, a scary supernatural movie called *The Kiss*, I was asked to write and direct a much darker film by Tri-Star. It was a science fiction piece about NASA astronauts possessed by aliens who set about massacring their families. I took on the project for the money because our company needed an income stream, not because it appealed to me. The process of writing the script took four times longer than usual, it was depressing, and I would not have got through it without Jay Roach, acting as both my writing assistant and, on some days, my writing coach. His contributions were so substantial, in fact, that I credited him as co-writer on the screenplay. At the end of nearly a year we finally had a script we both felt was of substantial quality. While it still contained those very dark and malignant moments, they now managed to service the characters. We delivered the script to the studio, hoping to be rewarded with an opportunity to cast the film; the comment from the president was, "I think this is really a great script... do you think you could rewrite it into a comedy?"

### **IF WE ARE INVENTING SOMETHING "NEW," SHOULDN'T IT BE TOTALLY ORIGINAL?**

Strangely, the answer is no. Most great ideas are evolutions of earlier concepts. It's referred to as "building on the shoulders of others." Creativity reinvents the world. Great

leaps forward are often accomplished by systemically borrowing from the best, or most interesting, existing successes and then adding your own inner magic.

If there are only seven natural plots, then all literature is built on their shoulders.

## BUILDING BLOCKS

Once I have zoned in on my idea, I try to collect more material that resonates thematically to build the story. Reading or viewing materials that are linked to the concept I am exploring helps accelerate my process. If I am creating a buddy cop movie, I will view many similar, finished movies (thank you, Netflix). If I am working on a historical story, I will often refer to *Timelines of History*, a point-form book about people and what happened in the arts, sciences, wars, religions, etc., in every year dating back beyond the Greeks.

I will use a search program like Google Images to visually explore themes, objects, and emotions that connect to my goals. Movies are a photographic medium, and these searches can return vast arrays of materials — giving me a palette of stimulating image ideas. I often collect these in files of visual notes. A mountaineer's rope fraying against a rock, with a voice calling for help off screen, can be a scene. An old man sitting in a darkened room with only his wrinkled hands lit can portray loneliness. Pallbearers at the back of a hearse pulling out a tiny casket signify a child's death. A dying soldier's hand reaching for a butterfly is the poignant powerful last image in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1930.

I will read children's versions of classic stories so that I can quickly absorb the key ingredients: a lazy but effective way to stimulate character and story shapes. I read and view widely, seldom copying anything verbatim, but evolving fresh ideas that echo from the material in the way

they relate to my story. Research of any kind helps increase the materials from which your mind and imagination can draw, giving you more to play with.

### **WHEN I START TO ACTUALLY WRITE?**

I assemble my ideas in a loose, linear form, roughly (sometimes very roughly) in the order that I see my story. One approach is to collect notes on index cards, which has been referred to as the “shoebox” method. Take as much time as you like making notes about your theme on cards or Post-Its, and dump them as you go into a handy container, the shoebox. When you intuitively feel ready, sort the notes out on a bulletin board or across a floor. It is a powerful visual and physical aid to finding and organizing your plot characters and events quickly.

I have sampled many software systems, searching for the perfect idea organizer: Mind Mappers, Outliners, Carding Programs, and commercial Plot Developers. I would love to find a simple system that worked the way my brain does. Most companies will let you download and test-drive their programs for free. Try them; maybe you will be lucky. I still make lists and use cards when possible.

At Trilogy, we liken carding out a new story as a voyage into the unknown. We call our major plot points “Islands of Sanity.” We need surprisingly few Islands of Sanity to create a whole feature plot. Movie scripts are really short stories, not novels. Scripts may be 90 to 120 pages, but there is a surprising amount of unused white space on those pages. If you scraped together all the words in a script to read like prose, I estimate there would only be forty to seventy pages.

If we discover and lay out most of the key Island landing points along the way to complete the structure, it is easier to grasp the journey. Even though I have not answered every question, the work goes forward. We begin joining the dots as ideas come to fill in the spaces.

From these crude notes I write out the short version of my plot and uncritically and intuitively dump ideas into sections. I write inside this rough assemblage. *I try never to face a blank page.*

Sometimes I discover chains of ideas that might fit into several story places, and that move up and down the collective notes. I drop these pieces in where they seem to fit. Slowly, I assemble a script-like “thing,” without making the process exacting or refined. This process is similar to a painter making pencil sketches before switching to the oils; it is easy to erase and change sections. I write with no effort to put it into a proper script format. I try to stay loose and uncritical: a couple of lines of dialogue here, a scene description there, a cool action beat. I leave a few other files, or sheaves of Stickies with notes, open on my computer to keep tabs on things that don't fit yet. And I try to throw away the extra ideas that I don't use as quickly as possible so that I reduce the clutter.

Once I feel I have moved from a highly mobile and fluid discovery stage to the conviction that I have mapped most of the voyage, I import the work into a script-formatting program. I use one called Final Draft. It does the hard work of formatting and fulfilling the script conventions as I am accumulating a whole script, writing up and down through the pages, adding descriptions and dialogue until it all becomes a coherent whole. Final Draft includes a thesaurus to help find those pesky words that hide in the crevices of your brain. Amongst its many helpful features, it even allows you to compare versions of your work to show what has changed as things evolve.

Even better, it automatically saves copies of your script at set times to protect you from the horror of losing your work. YES, I HAVE DONE THAT. I can still remember the feeling in my body as I hit the wrong button and trashed the only file I had of a script in progress. My body knew before my brain realized it; the ugly feeling could best be termed a REVERSE ORGASM!

Older and more allergic to loss, I email my work to myself often during the day. That action gets my valuable efforts out of my home and onto the Internet. So no fire, theft, or memory collapse can kill my project. Creativity and anxiety are linked.

This is *my* natural process. Some of my professional writer friends simply sit down and write their script onto the blank page and figure things out as they go.

## HARD WORK

Once your story course is set, the process requires time and application. Scripts don't write themselves. They cannot be wished into existence. So try to find the most positive environment in which to allow this creative process to happen. Apply yourself often. I have a rule: I try to open my script file daily.

I say to myself, *I must write at least one line*. It doesn't feel hard or overwhelming. And, strangely, when I do open the file, my brain will often find itself dictating a stew of words or concepts that I had no previous conscious sense would come out of me.

It's important to put yourself in a place where your deep sea of thoughts can beach your latest harvest. Try to remove your toys and distractions. Unload the games off your MacBook. Find that place: your attic or your bed (thank goodness for portable computers). Play music. Be silent. Airplane flights can be incredibly productive for writing. I find that taking a shower often provides a strangely positive environment for breakthrough ideas. Whatever works for *you* is right!

Even in your best working conditions, do not beat yourself up if your work flow starts and stutters. I have internal weather; somehow it's important to work in the morning, but I feel foggy and find little productivity. Nevertheless, I keep myself loosely tied to the process, drinking lots

of tea and visiting the bathroom more times than is probably healthy. Hunting and pecking at the pre-existing material is a common morning process for me. The early parts of my scripts will have been groomed a hundred times more than my endings.

In the later part of the afternoon it is as if the sun has come out. My mind seems to find a way to increase the flow of words. It's frustrating because I wish my entire day was this productive.

I have learned that reading my scripts in the evening when I am tired can be demoralizing. Their real values are much more obvious when one is fresh.

### **MURDER YOUR INTERNAL CRITIC**

All writers have them — inner voices that rant and rage at our efforts. Mine floats behind my left shoulder and can be a real jerk. I have never found that voice in my head to be an accurate beacon of what I am accomplishing.

So my advice is to try to devise a method of ignoring your doubts. I have heard that some artists have an internal discussion with their critical voice. They have succeeded in damping it down by asking it to take a break until they have finished the material.

### **ONCE IN A WHILE IT FEELS IMPOSSIBLE TO MAKE A MOVE OF ANY KIND**

Writer's block is totally normal. It just happens. I once asked Sylvester Stallone how he coped. His response was, "I just start writing anything. Whatever comes to mind. And pretty soon I find the good stuff is coming back to me."

I found this great note on the Internet one day, written by Andrew Cavanagh:

## Eliminate “Writer’s Block” Forever

Secret #1 to writing:

This will sound bad I know but stick with me here...

Take the attitude you’re going to write ANY OLD CRAP on the subject that you can come up with.

Whatever you think of — just write it down.

Any old nonsense — GREAT. Just put it on paper (or onto your screen).

A pile of steaming crap no one would ever read?

Not your problem — just write it anyway.

Just fill up pages and pages with any old crap and keep writing straight off the top of your head for as long as you can.

Stop thinking about it and just do it.

Now if you follow secret no 1 you’re going to be surprised.

The biggest mistake most writers make is that they confuse the creative process with the critical process.

When you’re setting out to write something you’re in the creative process.

I’ve written full books in 7 days.

But that can’t happen if you’re constantly worrying about how good, bad, or accurate what you’re writing is.

You’re in the creative process.

Let your creative side come out by disengaging your critical process.

If I’m writing any old crap then my critical side has no work to do. I know it’s crap already.

After years of writing I began to notice “any old crap” is often pretty good.

I was using sections and pages of non-fiction writing I’d done off the top of my head over and over in other products, articles etc.

That’s the first bonus.

A lot of that “any old crap” writing is good! Really good!!

But you might say “What if it’s not good? What if any old crap really is crap?!”

And that leads us to secret no 2 — the biggest secret of great writing.

Secret # 2 — Great writing is all about REWRITING.

Once you have something to work with it’s really easy to work it over and polish it so it shines.

It is far easier to add to a piece of writing you’ve already done.

It’s far easier to edit writing you’ve already done so it flows better.

But it’s very hard to look at a blank screen and write something brilliant from scratch. So write any old crap then rewrite it till it sparkles. Easy.<sup>2</sup>

## LIFE SCRIPTS

I firmly believe that we are happiest and most productive when we are working from our true nature and not trying to guess and fake what someone else wants.

As I said, I have taken on projects that were against my nature. And it literally felt like I was having to pluck the words from my flesh to get those damn things out of me.

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<sup>2</sup> For more tips on copywriting and eliminating writer’s block by Andrew Cavanagh, go to: <http://www.copywriting1.com/2007/03/eliminate-writers-block-forever.html>.

The scripts that are written with a powerful sense of my inner vision are more creative, complex, and rich somehow. I call these my “life scripts.” They contain something more profound that derives from my spirit, from my unconscious. These scripts are special. I instinctively fight harder to get them right. I sense that others see them as deeper and more significant. They seem to get produced more frequently than the scripts that are less personally inspired.

I know that something is going on deep in my unconscious when I write because in my day-to-day exchanges with family and in dealing with outside issues, I am slower. I am less efficient, preoccupied. I sense that part of my mind is sorting out ideas somewhere in the gray matter. And when I finish a script, I sense a change. I get my head back; I feel clearer and freer with my thinking again. I know I am done.

### **IT EXISTS. CONGRATULATIONS!**

When you have completed a draft, celebrate that accomplishment. Print it out; feel and smell the pages. Encourage yourself. Reward yourself with some time alone with it. This is the first time you have accessed your creation. It is real.

The big work of imagining the landscape is done. Lewis and Clark have reached the Pacific. The next step on the journey is so much easier. You have the opportunity to review, delete, nip and tuck the finished piece. I call this “putting the freeway through.”

I have discovered that my mind adopts a different focus when I rewrite material. It releases elements that were not needed and sees how to edit them out. Maybe I had to write them to discover where I was going. I also search out the pieces of logic that don't quite link up and try to join these pieces together.

Then I get trusted reads from people whose opinions I know mesh with my own feelings. I listen and learn from

their reactions and tweak the script further (more on this in the “Editing” section).

I don't let a script out into the wild until I am fairly certain my vision is clear on the page and that others understand what I have tried to communicate. Then, and only then, do I go broadly out to the community.

### **IF IT DOESN'T GET MADE, DID I FAIL?**

Most script don't sell just as most actors don't get jobs from their auditions. But, frequently, something good comes to gift the effort. People may love the work and invite you to write about a project they envisage, or ask to review other scripts you have. Effort brings opportunity.

Each time you create from your inner voice it is a valuable process. I have discovered that I write in repeating patterns of story that are present in many different genres and styles. When I was on the set directing my script of *Moll Flanders*, a movie that starred Robin Wright and Morgan Freeman, my partner John Watson asked me a question that floored me. “How come none of your leading characters have mothers?” I think I slapped my forehead in surprised recognition. It was true; I had lost my own mother at the age of eight. Without any consciousness I had created many stories that echoed that experience. I think that writing often comes to us as a method through which the psyche works out life's issues.

It is now clear to me that something in my instrument gets stronger each time I write. It is a process of building my creative muscles. An unsold script is not a waste; it is part of the psychic structure that is helping you develop as an artist.

### **THE VAN GOGH SYNDROME**

Yes, there is the danger that what you create will be so unique it will not be understood by those around you.

In many ways, that level of creativity is to be revered. The language of storytelling is constantly evolving, and new visions and approaches excite me immensely. I call this the Van Gogh syndrome.

When we first came to Hollywood, John Watson and I took the marketing analysis people from Universal Studios to lunch. We asked, based on their research, what kind of movies were most wanted by the audience? The answer was “new, interesting, and different!” But movies at that level of novelty were very scary for the studio executives because there were no precedents to justify the risk. It is much safer to keep your job making a sequel to an old hit, or buying the rights to an old TV show or video game or comic book hero. Treading new ground requires courage and vision.

This is why studios are often only taken into the future kicking and screaming. The story goes that Fox Studios, fearing it had a stinker on its hands, was trying to sell off *Star Wars* to an investor as a tax break until the day it opened. The studio just didn't know how to quantify it. A similar story about *American Graffiti* is told that the executive at Universal felt that George Lucas had “f###ked him” when he first saw the finished film, a film that cost one million dollars back then, and went on to gross one hundred million dollars once it got released. In this day of corporate-run studios, original ideas are even harder to sell.

But the actors and directors are on your side. They want to challenge their skills by taking on the unique and meaningful. Look at the films that get nominated for Oscars. There is a market — it's just tougher. The problem is finding a way to define your work for the less enlightened buyer.

Sadly, Van Gogh sold no paintings but was a brilliant, if strange, man. And he had a massive influence on others. I wish you the same, except while you are alive. Please do not send me your ears!

### **THE WORST THING I'VE NEVER DONE!**

Probably the biggest lesson I have learned in my career is that my errors of omission have damaged me far more than any errors of commission.

What I have left undone, un-thought, and untried through self-doubt have been incredible, missed opportunities. You are guaranteed a 100% failure rate if you never try. I have seldom been damaged much by the things I attempted to do or that didn't go right.

Many times I took a wild risk in the writing or selling of projects that turned out to trigger incredible successes.

I know it's not easy. I have to keep reminding myself to do it. Take on the challenge of writing... be daring!

If you have a story in your heart you yearn to write, explore the world of *Riding The Alligator* further, including videos, essays, and helpful links at

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