Building a platform part two

By Carol Howard Merritt
November 27, 2012

Lately I've been getting a lot of questions about how to get published, how to build a platform, how to become a speaker. So, I'm dedicating this week to some of the questions that people ask me. Yesterday, I looked at why a platform is important. Today, I want to talk about the the big ideas. All of this, of course, is just how I do it. There are many others who will give you different advice.

It's a network, not a platform. Embrace the platform language when you're writing your book proposal or talking to a publisher. Realize that it's all a part of the business, but never let it enter your practice.

Readers are not shoulders that we stand on so that we can get bigger. They are people. They are colleagues. We work alongside them. We long to connect with them. We want to hear their stories. When we speak at a conference, we take time to listen to them and form relationships. When we're engaged with social media, we don't use it as a one-way megaphone to drop our wisdom or the location of our next event, but we read as much as we spout.

It's hard to do this when we are people of ideas who like to work behind closed doors for hours.

It's also difficult because building a network can be painful. When we stand on top of a platform of faceless fans, and someone throws a tomato at us, then we imagine that we can easily wipe off the fruit. When we're part of a network and readers criticize us, it hurts. When people get jealous, hate us, or write nasty things about our hard work, and we are part of a living breathing body of humans, we not only hear what they have to say but it pains us.

When it is beyond our human capacity to help them, we feel bad (yet, while building a highly relational network, we also have to know our limits and be understanding about the capacity of others).

I've watched as artists develop resentments against their audience. It's creepy. They get angry because not enough people showed up, because less intellectual writing is more popular, because their audience also likes another artist who is younger (or older). It's akin to pastors who don't love their congregation.

Also remember that other authors are a part of our network. It's easy to slip into competition mode, imagining every other artist as a threat. But we're all in this together and it's important to promote other writers, appreciate their work, learn from them, and refer them to conference organizers and publishers.

Get used to working for free. I know writers who take the amount of money that they're being paid for an article, post, or book chapter, and divide it by the word count so that they can calculate how much money they make for every word. Maybe that worked at one time. I don't know. But I do know that you can't do it now, or you will spend most of your time crying and not enough time writing.

As you build a network, you may need to blog, tweet, write for edited volumes, contribute to magazines, and do all sorts of stuff that may not have a check at the end of it. I've made a conscious decision to blog and contribute to a lot of projects. This means that I have not written as many books as I would have liked, it may make my work more ephemeral, but I do know that my books are still selling and helping congregations, so I feel good about that.

Think of it as communicating to your congregation. People read the newsletter, the bulletin, Facebook posts, annual report, or the emails. But most people do not read them all, so you need to keep communicating through them all. Plus a person may have to hear a message several times before he or she actually *hears* it. It's the same with our writing.

Just write the words. Don't be stingy with them. The day may come when the requests far outweigh our ability to keep up with them and we have to start prioritizing, but not while we're building our platform. For now, we can understand that we will be working for the love of it.

Go for the long-haul. It seems like there's a tortoise and hare thing that happens in publishing. A person makes a big splash and gets a lot of media attention. I used to have a tendency to stress out about this a bit, as if their spotlight means that I've done everything wrong.

I should have hired an agent. I should have a publicity person. I should have a better website. I need cooler clothes. I need to be speaking at that other conference. I need to lose ten pounds. How can I call myself a spiritual writer when I don't even have any tattoos? I need to build my brand.

I've been writing now for seven years, and even in that short time, I've seen people get wonderful media attention. Then it goes away.

Some people have a lot of audacity, but not a lot of substance. So their ideas are really interesting, but after fifteen minutes, you get to the end of their thought and there's nothing left.

There are also those who have a lot of heft and substance, but they finish their dissertation and it's like their afraid to write again. Maybe they're surrounded by the criticism of academia that choked their work, maybe they're overloaded with the tasks of educational bureaucracy, but they just don't produce much.

So, I try to keep some middle ground. My mantra is, *Keep your head down. Just keep working.* There may be a day when I need to get an agent, hire a publicist, lose ten pounds, design a tattoo, and do all of those things, but I'm in it for the long haul. I just need to produce.

Now that we've established those big ideas, tomorrow we'll dig into the nitty-gritty.