

Book Journeys Author Interview - Aug. 16, 2012

Dr. Angela Lauria with Dr. Rob Pennington, author of *Find The Upside Of The Down Times: How To Turn Your Worst Experiences Into Your Best Opportunities!*

"I was shot in the center of the chest by an unknown assailant with a .38 caliber handgun. It was one of the best things that ever happened to me." ~Dr. Rob Pennington

ANGELA:

Wow! Welcome to another edition of Book Journeys Radio. This is Angela Lauria from Journey Grrrl Publishing and every weekend at Book Journeys Radio we talk about the process of getting your first book written, published and promoted... and that is what we like to help people with over at Book Journeys Radio so everybody could tell good stories, it is possible and Dr. Rob Pennington has done it. He is an Educational Psychologist, a speaker, a coach and, yes, an author. He's the author of *Find the Upside of the Downtime: How to Turn Your Worst Experiences into Your Best Opportunities*. And uh...if you are following along with the show, and you want to check out Dr. Rob's website, you can go to drobpennington.com. That's P E N N I N G T O N.com and you will find more about Dr. Rob there and you can also listen here. So, Dr. Rob, welcome to the show.

DR. ROB:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited about it, Angela.

ANGELA:

Terrific!

DR. ROB:

I don't often get to talk about the process that went through for the book... just about the content of the book.

ANGELA:

That's right!

DR. ROB:

So, this is the exciting opportunity.

ANGELA:

It's a little bit of a twist on I think what most author usually talk about, but I always like to start by saying, "Tell us about the book first... so we know... we know, kind of, the journey that you went on... and we understand the book. So, tell us all about it."

DR. ROB:

Well, the book is an autobiographical, self-help book. Its chapters about experiences in my own life, about getting shot in the center of my chest, about getting fired, about getting

divorced, being audited, caring for my wife with multiple sclerosis for ten years until her passing - each of these graduate school lessons in life that I experienced. Each chapter has the lesson I learned through that and an activity for the reader to practice to save them the time and avoid the pain I went through in learning the same lesson.

ANGELA:

Wow! Well, I gotta ask - those are some pretty big downtimes. What? What? What? Give us a couple lessons from your book. I wanna know what to do if I got shot in the chest.

DR. ROB:

Ha ha ha ha ha. Well... I... You have to go the first house with the light on and hope it's a heart surgeon. Which was what happened for me. (Chuckles)

ANGELA:

Are you serious? Wow!

DR. ROB:

Uh, yeah. You know, I was walking over [to] the drugstore, and then uhm, a car drove by kind of slow. The guy got out. I thought he was just gonna ask directions. Somebody grabbed me and told me to get in his car, and of course that's a pretty frightening moment - two of the men jumped out of the car... But the lesson was, that I have been practicing for some years, uh, moving through stress quicker; learning how to recognize what I'm having a difficult reaction to something and moving through it faster, moving from what I call an automatic stress reaction to the stress management response. I was able to do that, and in just that moment, by thinking about, "What is... I... What do I need to do right now? All I need to do is kind of backup. I got out of his reach, and then I asked, "What do you want?" And he just smiled and shot me. This is not something I'd expected. This is not part of my little movie. He shot me in the center of my chest... 3 or 4 feet away, and uh... that's the dramatic moment. Now, the miracles are that the bullet stuck in the sternum - stuck in my breast bone. He grabbed my shirt and created wadding around the bullet and I didn't bleed at all, and it didn't knock me down. I think it scared the guy, 'cause they turned and ran away. And I turned and went to the first house with the light on, and the man who opened the doors we're in operating clothes - he was a heart surgeon. This is a pretty miraculous story and the way the chapter begins, is this is, you know, "I was shot in the center of the chest by an unknown assailant with a .38 caliber gun. It was one of the best things that ever happened to me."

ANGELA:

Okay, is it?

DR. ROB:

It got me thinking about how, in most circumstances, when we have challenges, when we have difficult things that happen. We don't realize that there's also gonna be opportunities available that will not be there otherwise. And sometimes those opportunities are valuable and

actually are maybe more valuable than challenge in our ongoing life, because that shooting story... you know you wanted to go after that right away, and I've been a professional speaker for many years, it's a signature story, it's now the first chapter of my book. It's a very dramatic story, but underneath is really lessons I've learned about how I'd moved from the elementary lessons in life - learn to breathe deeper and relax completely and reassure myself and look for some humor, ah, and doing that all throughout the day so that when the graduate school lessons come I'm more prepared.

ANGELA:

Ah, so I see the distinction you're making between graduate school lessons and you know... lessons and I think it's interesting reference to your book, but I also think, and tell me when I'm wrong here, but I think that's a great structure that you're able to kind of talk about your story then. I talk to my authors a lot about finding structures, finding metaphors that they can use to build them; to help tell their stories faster. So is that something you came up with?

DR. ROB:

Yeah. The idea that is... I'm a psychologist and so trying to communicate often complex concepts in ways that are easily understandable - one of the things that I've realized is that your personality could simply be defined by the lessons you've learned and the lessons you haven't learned; the things you're good at, the things you're not so good at. And all your stresses by definition are about your unlearned lessons. I took that model and, you know, and put that into my book and used my own experience as a way of saying, "Hey, you can and do wonderful things that every great... , but hey, difficult things happen. Life's difficult. You gonna have challenges, but even in those, there are opportunities, and then these plant as seeds about... there are lessons that we have to learn in life. And sometimes the most important lessons come in the most challenging circumstances, like when my wife had multiple sclerosis... Many many people, millions of people, are gonna be in a caregiving role in their lifetime - I think pretty much everybody. If you are parents, you're certainly caring for your children, but we certainly think of caregiving now as caring for spouses who are ill or caring for parents in their elder years, and that is a major transformation in a person's life and taking on the responsibility (increasing responsibilities) for others, "Wow, still trying to take care of your... responsibilities. And one of the lessons I've learned in that is... *you gotta have help*. And a lot of these have a big unlearned lesson, making it difficult for us to even ask for help, and we make life harder than it has to be, because we haven't learned the lesson, then it's okay to ask for help. We wanna help others... We're happy when others ask us to help them, but somehow we think it would be an imposition to ask them for help. And so, one of my... chapters is, you know, about help.

ANGELA:

And I can't... I mean obviously it seems trivial to equate writing a book with helping your wife with some answers... dealing with being shot in the chest... but I do think that lesson travels across... there are lots of authors... wanna be authors who haven't finished their book because they haven't asked for help and whether it's asking a friend to read a... you know, to

read your draft or whether it's asking a, uhm, you know, professional book coach or a publishing company or, you know, a graphic design artist design your cover, and...

DR. ROB:

And I agree. I had the same problem. *I had the same problem...* and I didn't apply it to the area of writing the book. And so I've wrote a lot of this book ten years ago, and uh, didn't really know where and how to go with it, whatever. I had an agent look at it and said, "Well, it's just a bunch of stories," you know. "It's not really a book." And so, that... How may I say it? Okay, well, what do I need to do to make it a book? And what I came up with [is] this structure of a real story, the lesson I learned, and an activity for the reader to practice to short ti- ... short circuit their life to get to that lesson quicker... That became the structure that... then I... did each chapter with, and then did a summary chapter of all the lessons... and that then became the book.

ANGELA:

And how long did it take you from, maybe not the ten-year part, but when you found that structure to when you've finished it?

DR. ROB:

Probably another year of... first... writing back and forth with my business partner, probably ten times on every chapter. And there's another problem because, you know, you can get stuck improving your copy all the time and you never finish. So, you have to like, stop and say, "Okay, I'm gonna go with it." But then I hired an editor. That was one of the best things that we ever did. Now I was very naive. I've never done it before and I've thought of an editor as just someone who would, you know, check the grammar and the punctuation and that kind of thing and I was very grateful that my editor did way more than that. I mean, she would read sections and she'd come back and say, uh, "You're trying to be funny here, but you're not." She really gave me good feedback. She would say, "You're making a point here, you made it two pages before, which one do you want to keep?" She would say, "This doesn't really make sense to me, what do you think about it being phrased this way?" And those kinds of comment...

ANGELA:

So that was more of a partnership or a developmental kind of editor, not just a copy editor.

DR. ROB:

Yes, she really helped with it being readable and that was really wonderful because most... my business partners gave an... and we know this material. We've been teaching it for 30 years and so we needed someone who didn't know our voice; who didn't know the concepts at all. And that was really valuable because, in her reading it, she could really see where we were just making assumptions about what we were saying and help us say it in a better way, the way I, I would say (in my book) about her, she... (her name was Jamie Fuller) I said she was also very patient and educated. She helped me make every sentence more readable and

understandable. She went way beyond cleaning up my grammar, which needed a lot. She helped remove multiple redundancies, fuzzy thinking, and confusing phrases. They might have been funny when I said them, but did not have the same effect when read. I will get credit for being a better author than I really am because of her talent and getting the best phrased idea onto the page.

ANGELA:

So how did you find her?

DR. ROB:

Well, I had help from someone else too. I had my graphics designer, Suzanne _____ Perry, she really shepherded the whole thing. She just didn't design the cover and the interior part of the book. She really worked with an original typographer to put things together but she found me Jamie and she really taught me a lot about the whole process of the project and gave me guidance and education and overall, like the importance of the overall look... design... but internally and externally that I really didn't appreciate. I think it really makes a big difference to how the book looks, the title, and how it feels inside. And so I was willing to invest in that because I'm self-employed, which means I'm permanently unemployed and always looking for work, and so... and you know the purpose of the book is really to make a new step in my career. It's establishing a brand and moving in some new directions and so I wanted to put as much value into it as I could and I needed help 'cause I didn't know how to do those things.

ANGELA:

So what advice would you give someone who uhm, let's say they were where you were - they think they have a book; maybe they have a book in their head - a manuscript that's, you know, unfinished as yours was... What would you suggest to them to do next? Maybe they went to an agent like you did and the agent said, "This isn't a book." What do they say?

DR. ROB:

Well, one of the first things I've made, which I think was a big mistake was I just focused on the things I wanted to say. And I thought it would be beneficial to others but I think, what I would have done differently... I would have put a little more effort into... who's my market and what are the needs that they are already aware of and what can I do to meet those needs, because, I think otherwise, you have to kinda convince someone that they need what you have to offer and... and hurdle right off the bat. So that's one of the things I would have thought about differently is: Who's my target market? What are their needs? How is what I'm gonna write gonna meet those needs? And how do I speak to them in a most direct way? So that's one thing I would have done differently. The other thing is I would have realized that the purpose of the book is not to do... get the book done, it's to create an opportunity to build a following and to work with the people who are interested in what you have to say and marketing and publicity - it's called a platform, and I didn't write the book thinking about that. Now I do, so that I'm thinking about how the book drives people back to more information on

my website. I did think enough to put one link at the end of the first chapter that sends people to a video of me talking about some of the concepts in the first chapter that I don't elaborate a lot on in the book, but I think, if I was going to redo it, I would have almost every chapter go to additional information. Now we're talking about a non-fiction-type book. But I think that in a fiction book, a fiction writer typically isn't going to do just one, they're going to do a series and they're gonna want people who are interested in their brand and their characters and having a way to provide them more information about it on a website and get the person's email so that you can communicate with them... In a way building a platform is the purpose of the book and that's a different mindset than I had before I wrote the book.

ANGELA:

Interesting. Okay. And what... What did you do to really envision your book as completed? What would you say, before you started, helped you kind of cross the finish line with.. holding a book in your hand?

DR. ROB:

Well, again it goes back to help; having friends and family... my business partner all involved in the process, involved in giving me feedback. I think before I got people really involved, it would just kinda sit on my computer as something I need to get to sometime. So getting others involved in the process made it more a project that I'm going to take through to completion. Some people have a great strength about completing projects. That's not my strength. I'm really good at creating them, but [I need] support in finishing it and getting it accomplished. And like I said earlier, you have to just decide to stop at some point. I would always wanna kind of teach more... put more into it... but hey that's another book.

ANGELA:

Yeah. The art part of writing a book. Uhm, one of the things... I teach a class called The Coaches Book Circle... and when I'm talking to my authors... Today in class, we spent a lot of time in understanding the "why" for writing a book. So did you have a vision of why you wanted a book? What you wanted it to do for you? What was your..?

DR. ROB:

Well, part of my motivation was to restart my speaking career after caring for my wife for a decade, I really had withdrawn a lot from life and marketing myself and now I need to rebuild that and having a book is a critical piece of the pie and marketing yourself as a professional speaker - I'm a great speaker, but people go, "What's your book?" And so I... That was one factor... I need to have that. The other thing is, I have been limited in the 30 years of my work, to helping people who are in the same room with me, either as a psychotherapist or a speaker, and I wanted to be able to have a positive impact on people beyond that, but frankly I was afraid. I didn't know that I could do in a book what I could do when I'm speaking. *I'm a speaker. I'm not an author*, I thought. And so, that put me off for many years. But as I started to write and started to get feedback from others about the value and the impact that it had, the

difference that it made just reading a chapter... boy that really encouraged me to realize I can't do this. I can't put value on the page that makes the difference for people. And so, that was a big hurdle, over [and] into a new way of interacting with the broader population that I'm wanting to do.

ANGELA:

And so for you, what has been.. like... Has it worked for you? What's been the best thing that's come of writing your book and did it align with that vision or that goal?

DR. ROB:

Uhm, yes. I mean, I've been overwhelmed with how powerful the book has affected people's lives. It's way more than I had ever imagined in my best dreams. The feedback that I'm getting... the reactions that I'm getting to it... uh, how much people enjoy... people reading it many times... people are buying multiple copies for their family members... the people they care for. Bible study groups are wanting to make it part of their couples groups are using it. People who are involved in like, support groups for an illness are using it and as a result, I've developed a workbook to go along with it as a facilitator's guide... developing a series of videos that go along with each chapter. And so if I didn't have that reaction, you know, it wouldn't have created the opportunities for other products as well as opportunities for other ways of serving people and so I'm just thrilled that's it's really, you know, rung the bell and did achieve the goal of having the kind of impact with me not being in the room that I wanted. And I think it also has helped a lot in positioning me as a speaker and so... I'm redoing speaking materials and also working with the media. You know, having a book is a critical component, like I wouldn't be doing this interview if I didn't have this book. And so it's opened up a lot of opportunities that were not there before. And I've won a three awards for it too, so that's pretty good.

ANGELA:

Why don't you tell us about your awards and how you won them?

DR. ROB:

Well, you have many opportunities to submit your book to various organizations as kind of a... Like if you go to art fairs, sometimes, they have a judging system. Well it's the same thing with books, you can submit your books to various organizations, associations... I have a pinnacle award for best self-help book of the year, and two USA Finalist awards... one for best self-help book and one for best non-fiction. ANd so this is coming from other authors, and so that was wonderful too, I'd just... never even dreamed that. So you just submit it to various judging organizations and hope for the best.

ANGELA:

Can you talk about... uhm, you're actually a speaker... You were a professional speaker before writing the book, right? :

DR. ROB:

Yes.

ANGELA:

And you're a member of the National Speaker's Association and things like that.

DR. ROB:

Uhm huh.

ANGELA:

How... uhm. Can you give us a specific example of how a place for having a book has helped with your... with that side of your business? With having a speaking career?

DR. ROB:

Well, I have products at the back of the room I can sell... and that has been important. Just little simple examples of having a book signing... Normally [in] a book signing, it's... you just sit there and sign the book, but my book signings are seminars. So, I had a bookstore... I did a lecture in the morning for about 45 minutes and then had a follow up with the book signing and had a lecture on a different topic in the afternoon - a follow up. I had a church that had a book signing for me and I was this... uh... did the Sunday sermon as a speaker. And those wouldn't have happened without the book. So those are some examples of how the book has made a difference for me. Also there's this hospital system that's... someone read the book and brought me in to do presentations for their staff. There's a lot of opportunities but the book helps me brand myself. I'm even... I'm the upside down doctor.

ANGELA:

Ah. Oh, I like that! That;s great!

DR. ROB:

I help people find the upside of their down times. I help people speed through stress in five steps in fifteen seconds, one of which is to smile for no reason. (Chuckles)

ANGELA:

I like it. That's the way I get through my work... every morning whenever I wanna stop, like all I have to do is smile.

DR. ROB:

It makes a difference. And so the book... all kinds of marketing, publicity, uh, speaking, my whole career is now influenced by having accomplished this book. The book in itself. If you just have it up on Amazon, that's just like a lemonade stand. If nobody comes by, nobody buys, and I don't think I knew that all the book did was got me in the game. Now I've gotta learn all about marketing and publicity. Now I've gotta generate an interest and having to be good is just an entrance requirement.

ANGELA:

Uhm huh. And so why don't you just take a couple of minutes just to tell us a little bit about the downtimes. What thing, the hardest things, either in writing your book or promoting it or getting it published?

DR. ROB:

Well I did have a hard time in the... I self-published and I read a lot of books and they recommended a company and I went with them and they produced it and put it up on Amazon but then it was not available. It was listed but you couldn't buy it. And I would call them and they said, "Well, Amazon is having a problem." AND I call Amazon and they say, "Well no, *they're* having a problem." And so obviously, they were in some conflict and here I was, having a publicity campaign already and the book wasn't available. And so I... Eventually, I had to go back to them and said, "You know, I need Amazon. I don't need you. And uhm, got out of the contract with them. Then I went to CreateSpace.com, which is Amazon's print-on-demand company. And I would highly recommend people consider this self-publishing because it was wonderful. Best customer service ever and I have just been extremely pleased but that first process was very difficult and I don't know how I could've gotten around it. I was just following the guidelines I was given and the research I was doing and the people who I trusted would recommend me. So that was one hurdle.

ANGELA:

And how about on the promotion... What then..?

DR. ROB:

Well that... I've had to redo my website because I wanted to have this kind of opt-in option where I give away free material and get people's email so I can build a platform of people [all of which are] interested in what I have to offer, and I didn't have that. So if I was gonna be successful in publicity and have a lot of people coming to want information, I didn't have any way of capturing or giving it. That's been a big change for me as... reorienting myself to... I'm not just a speaker, I'm not just a psychologist, I'm not just an author... I'm a marketer. I had to learn how to do that. That's been... This whole year has been about... Last year was all about getting the book into print. This year is about letting anybody know it exists.

ANGELA:

Yeah. When did your book come out?

DR. ROB:

It came out a year ago... last August.

ANGELA:

Okay, about a year ago. And... I guess the question I always wanna ask authors is, if you were talking to somebody in this room (and this has probably happened to you) where you're

talking to somebody who says, “ Oh, my goodness. You wrote a book. That’s so awesome. I would love to write a book.” What’s the most important advice that you could give to them?

DR. ROB:

Start writing and don’t evaluate it. Think of it more like a journal. I think what we’re trying to do from the very beginning is we kinda edit every sentence we write and that just makes it terrible. There’s a book called, *Writing Down the Bones* and I thought was very valuable. It just talks about getting stuff on paper. Don’t worry about what it sounds like. Don’t worry about what sense it makes, just get it down on paper. You come back later and look at it. You’re gonna come back later and work on it, but just get it down and just start putting words on paper.

ANGELA:

Fantastic.

DR. ROB:

And the second thing is, get other people to look at it and tell you what they like and don’t like and you gotta not take that personally. They’re giving you valuable information about what’s ringing their bell. And if you know what your target market is, then that’s gonna be even more focused activity. You’re gonna want those people to be responding and... I know a friend of mine who... every time she does a book, she sends out five or six titles to a group of 20 - 35 people and says, “Which one do you like best?” You know, ‘cause she wants to know which one’s gonna ring the bell. The other thing I know is that it’s important that you’re able to get a book title that has a domain name you can get. [It’s] getting harder and harder, but you wanna be able to...

ANGELA:

Do you have that for you or do you just use your name there as a..?

DR. ROB:

No, no. I do have mine... TheUpsideofTheDowntimes. I have UpsideDowntimes. I have TheUpsideDownDoctors... you know, I have a lot of things. I even have my name misspelled. Instead of DrRobPennington, I have DrRobPendleton, you know. So I’ve learned a lot about uhm, you know. If we’re gonna go and get publicity, my goal is to have one radio interview a day. I listen to people like Jack Canfield of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* and the author of *Seven Habits... How Effective People...*

ANGELA:

Do you...

DR. ROB:

Yes, yes. ...business partner, both of them. I've attended programs with them and they said, "You know we had difficulty selling our book until we got onto doing radio one day, we... once a day. And then the book..."

ANGELA:

Yeah, that's. I think that's great advice and just sticking with it and getting the message out there because it might look like, from the outside in, that the authors are just getting candid things but most authors are working for it just like you are and so...

DR. ROB:

Oh, yeah. And you know, Canfield has sold 500 million copies, but boy, I have never known anyone who did absolutely everything, you know, that is possible to let people know about a book. I mean he's just an impressive marketer and that's what I've learned you have to do. And so, you know, part of the rest of my life is gonna be devoted to marketing this book. It's just a powerful way of saving people time and pain.

ANGELA:

Well, you have marketed today, so I would encourage everybody to get a copy of Dr. Robert Pennington's *Finding the Upside of the Downtime: How to Turn Your Worst Experiences into Your Best Opportunities*. Sounds like a great book. Dr. Rob, I appreciate your time today. I will be back next week on Book Journeys Radio.

DR. ROB:

Thank you so much Angela.