THE ELEVEN LAWS OF SHOWRUNNING

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Upon finding this essay, any number of showrunners with whom I have worked in the past will assume it is a calculated personal attack: a retroactive shiv to the kidneys delivered in the language of a management lesson.

No matter that what follows is a distillation of some twenty years of experience - ten spent exclusively in upper tier positions in television series - I wholly expect to read this by the light of bridges set on fire by any number of former bosses who will no doubt believe I am writing this out of envy, or to avenge some perceived slight, or was just too chickenshit to say it to their faces.

Also, there's nothing in the following 86,000 words about *Lost*.

If I have worked for you in the past and - after reading all these disclaimers - you still think that something in the following text is a singular attack on you, there's a song from the 1970s I'd like to play for you.

Call me. I know you have my number.

Carly Simon's lyrical stylings aside, it often takes that level of it's-all-about-me ego to be a television writer/producer: the conviction that what you have to say matters so much that it is worth not only mastering the tropes of an entire medium, but also the risk that all the intermediaries required to turn your interpretation of those tropes into the finished product (the actors, directors, producers, the person who embroiders the series logo on the back of the chairs) will ruin it all with some fatal blend of incompetence and incomprehension, or out of a calculating Salierian malice born from resentment of your undeniable genius.

The dark side of the drive to prove one's primacy of vision (colloquially better known as "I'LL SHOW YOU FATHER THAT YOU WERE WRONG TO NOT LOVE ME!") is that inefficient and self-indulgent - and more often than not abusive - senior management is endemic to the television industry. As cable, streaming, and Internet services adopt the television production model to generate content, the problem only gets worse.

Historically, there never was much of an apprenticeship/ mentorship mentality in television - writers are notoriously taciturn and parochial about their "creative process." However, when there were only three to five broadcast networks and a much longer queue to the top of the food chain, someone who worked their way up the hierarchy from staff writer (the lowest and least paid position) to show creator/executive producer/ showrunner could at least be reliably understood to have at least spent a decade learning how to make the trains run on time under the oftentimes capricious tutelage of writer/producers who had endured the same trials.

Nowadays, programming outlets are as likely (if not more, due to the never-ending quest for "a fresh voice") to buy television pilots from playwrights, screenwriters (many of whom toil for years - and are very well paid - without ever having to do the practical work involved in production), novelists, investigative journalists, and bloggers whose "my year of doing this and not that" article managed to break the Internet... and then put them in the position of having to manage what is essentially a start-up corporation with a budget in the eight figures and a hundred-plus employee workforce.

For many, the undeniable triumph that is pitching a series idea, having a pilot ordered, successfully producing it, and then having it ordered to series is nothing less than a validation: not only their voice and talent, but also of their Way of Doing Things. This often translates to an intractable adherence to the notion that "my creative process" is so of the essence to success that all other concerns must be made subordinate lest the delicate alchemy that made success possible be snuffed.

The manager of a TV mogul whose work I guarantee you know and admire once encapsulated this to me with a story. Upon receiving his first series order, the then-neophyte showrunner declared "Good, I can now be the monster I always knew I could be."

This fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to be a showrunner is only further enabled by television networks and studios. The economics of TV and film are such that a single, long-running hit show can not only support entire multinational corporations, it also funds all of their development for years running. For a television network, a single tentpole series can cement the network's brand for decades to come, set the pattern for duplicatable success, and create enough wealth to make Midas blush.

Consider *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation.* For a decade-and-a-half, the *CSI* franchise anchored CBS's reputation as the go-to destination for solidly-crafted, edgy, visually-innovative, case-of-the-week crime procedurals. *CSI* set the pattern for the network's subsequent hit shows - most of them following the basic outline of a gifted investigator leading a team of specialists in solving exotic mysteries (*Without a Trace*, *Cold Case*, *Criminal Minds*, *Criminals Minds Beyond Borders*, *Criminal Minds: Suspect Behavior*, *NCIS*, *NCIS: LA*, *NCIS: New Orleans*, *Elementary*, *Limitless*, *Hawaii 5-0*, *Scorpion*). *CSI* also spun off three satellite shows (*CSI: Miami*, *CSI: NY*, and *CSI: Cyber*) - of which *Miami* surpassed even the original as the most watched television series in The World.

Most importantly - far more so than such esoteric concerns as "aesthetics" and "artistic accomplishment" - the sheer volume of revenue generated by *CSI* simply boggles any ordinary mortal's dreams of avarice.

With all of this at stake - with success literally meaning the difference between a fifteen-year bull market and a Saharan drought - it is unsurprising that most showrunners are, and are tacitly allowed to remain, some of the most incompetent senior managers in the business world?

Because a hit (even a middling one... or even just a show that could become profitable by sheer dint of being on the air) has such revenue and image-generating potential, is it shocking that studios and networks will tolerate an almost endless amount of dysfunction - and are more than willing to avert their eyes from How The Sausage Is Made - in the name of getting it on time and on budget, and to preserve whatever sorcery it took to get there?

Of course not.

There are only two real sins for which a showrunner pays with a pink slip: wasting time and squandering money, and both of these contingencies are amply prepared for in studio plans and budgets. Missing an airdate and going egregiously (and I do mean "way beyond the pale" egregiously) over budget are the only two real firing offenses in the TV business... and, in truth, there is an entire army of dedicated professionals who stand beneath the showrunner day in and out to make sure that doesn't happen.

Why? Because they depend on the show - and the perceived creative and managerial genius of the showrunner - for their living. That's why.

So, once they have a show on the air, even the most inept of managers - or the most sociopathic of abusers - muddle through and keep their show on the air on something resembling time and on budget: usually by the sweat of a lot of talented individuals who are then denied credit for their toil at the altar of the "visionary auteur"'s brilliance.

Beyond that, who cares if the writers are made to sleep in cots in their offices and only go home for showers because the showrunner can't decide what story they want to tell and has them rewriting scenes that shoot the next day while they create story for an episode that is already in prep and starts filming the day after but doesn't have a script yet? Or that the assistants are verbally abused on a daily basis because they can't cover the phones and pick up lunches while performing personal services such as taking the showrunner's medical samples to his doctor and taping his children's recitals? Or that the art director and lead scenic painter are being asked by the showrunner's wife to redecorate his house and they are doing it because they know that to say no means to lose their job?

Studios and networks are far happier off letting their precious messianic autocrats persist in their belief that they are geniuses on par with Mozart - and that it is only the sheer idiosyncrasy of their "creative process" that allows the show to go on - than to take the risk of disrupting the creation of a hit show with such earthly concerns as fomenting a workflow that actually takes into account that the employees are human beings.

As long as the show comes in on time, on budget, and makes money, who cares?

The dirty little secret of TV, however, is that those who get their pilots made and show picked up on any given year are usually no more gifted, visionary, or prodigious, than the ones who did not. There are as many television writers who work regularly as there are professional NBA players at any given time - and, by that metric, we are all breathing rarefied air - but the process by which television shows are made and selected is by no means some mystical divination by which the special artistry of very special snowflakes is empowered that it may elevate the art form as a whole.

This is what actually happened when a show got on the air: an inventor (I mean "a writer") had an idea. Through a series of channels ("agents") the inventor went to a venture capitalist ("a studio") and got some guidance about developing the product. Together they then took it to a retailer ("network") who agreed to front money to build a prototype ("pilot"), and later, based on that prototype and their extant successes and projected needs (the "shows that they kept from last year and the ones that got cancelled"), they decided to put the entire product line (the "series") on their department store windows (their "air").

Television is - quite simply - a business: with seasonal patterns, production schedules, budgets, and deliverables... just like any other business.

And that's the dirtiest secret of the trade: it ain't magic, it ain't alchemy, and it sure as Shinola ain't mystical. The critics may call this a "golden age" - and it very well may be - but it's not the work of druidic conjurers on exotic hallucinogens wresting narrative from altars of living rock.

What we do is nothing more - or less - than mere hard work.. hard work that is not exclusive to any one person, but helped along by scores of competent, experienced professionals whose job security is tied to the longevity of the endeavor... hard work that can be done efficiently and thoughtfully... hard work that can be accomplished in a way that doesn't ask anyone involved to sacrifice their lives, dignity, and - sometimes - personal safety.

As special and wonderful as creativity may be, it is something that can be channeled, managed, made to work on call, and sent to bed at a decent hour. Any television show - from the worst of the formulaic, to the most genre-defining, medium-transforming phenomenon - can be made on time, on budget, and without demanding that any of the employees put more time at the mine than they absolutely have to... if the showrunners simply apply basic, commonsensical management strategy to their creative process.

Though specific to the day-to-day workflow of television, and the issues of writing and producing episodes of a series week and and week out, the following "laws" will seem - in principle - bafflingly simple to anyone who has worked in a professional environment, understands the need to effectively communicate to

employees the goals of an organization in order to succeed, and believes that effective leadership comes from giving clear commands and directives. Yet the truth remains that the number of showrunners whose staffs would describe them as "effective managers of the creative process" is in the minority.

Why is it so hard to implement some simple strategies in the name of running the show more efficiently?

The simple answer is that "simple" doesn't necessarily mean "easy". In my experience, the simplest decisions are often the hardest because they demand a painful concession to an unpleasant truth. In the case of every one of the laws below, they all ask for the same thing: that a showrunner surrender some infinitesimal quantum of their ego - of their attachment to the idea of themselves as the sole fountainhead of the show's greatness - to serve the show and those who work to make it instead of themselves.

It seems like a contradiction - to ask someone from whom visionary leadership is demanded to surrender their ego - but it isn't, because of...

THE FIRST LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
IT'S ALL ABOUT YOU
NOW STOP MAKING IT ALL ABOUT YOU

No, seriously, it REALLY is all about you.

You pitched an idea, sold a script, and got it made. You did it. You pushed it past the *pezzonovanti.* Now you have sixty million dollars and thirteen hours of network airtime - with a strong possibility for much more - for a bully pulpit. Nothing goes in front of the lens that you do not approve. Nothing gets on the screen without your stamp.

So you finally have the Brass Ring... and guess what? It won't make that you never found a publisher for your first novel any less painful, and it won't make your daddy finally love you, or your spouse more sexually compliant, or your kids less disdainful of your bad puns and clumsy attempts to make them understand that you really DID like and understand that last Sky Ferreira album.

You're still you. All the shit you hate about yourself is never going away. Deal with that.

You wanna know what it means when it's all about you?

More work.

For a functional showrunner, "more work" translates into putting your affectations behind, and performing day-in-and-out in service of your vision and your staff.

Once you accept that, accept this too: your staff works for you. They will do whatever you need done because they enter every conversation knowing that you can fire them. Their indenture is a given. Their loyalty is not.

By and large, your staff is here for a paycheck - that and the dimly remembered hope that they will receive some sort of creative fulfillment in the plying of their craft. It's on you to invest them in the vision of the show and turn them into true believers and dedicated workers who will go the extra mile... you do that by giving them the opportunity to express themselves within the framework you have created.

You know how you DON'T do that? By continually - and either passive-aggressively, or aggressively-aggressively - reminding them who's boss.

Everyone. Knows. It. Already.

The real question is: What will you do with that power? Will you demand that everyone jockey for your favor in order to have the information they need to do their job, or will you provide the information freely so that creativity blooms because, and not in spite, of you?

Are you strong and secure enough in your talent and accomplishment to accept the possibility that other people - properly empowered by you - can actually enhance your genius... or will you cling to the idea that only you can be the source of that genius?

How you answer that question determines the leader you will be.

THE SECOND LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
KNOW YOUR SHOW
AND TELL EVERYONE WHAT IT IS

It seems weird that someone would sell a show and then not really "know" what it is - or would be unwilling to share that information. Kind of like Steve Jobs not telling his staff more about the iPod than that "it's white and needs a dial"... and yet, not knowing - or not telling - what the show is one of the most common chronic diseases of the incompetent showrunner.

You see, there's more to knowing your show than understanding why you feel bad about your daddy never loving you and that you were able to turn that set of emotions into a police procedural (though your writers will most likely need that information stated to them very clearly and frequently that they may understand what you want them to deliver). All of your employees - from the directors to the costume designers to the guy who embroiders the back of the chairs - need specific knowledge of tone, texture, and technique of the show to do their jobs.

Even after producing the pilot episode, most of that valuable and absolutely crucial information still remains in your head. Remember, the pilot episode was a prototype - and was probably picked over by everyone at network, studio, marketing, etc. Now you have to discern what it was that worked so well in the pilot - and it may not have been solely the parts you were able to dictate and control - and turn them into a reproducible result. You also have to figure out the things that didn't work - a task that requires a certain amount of honesty and self-reflection - and then articulate to your writers and you crew how you want them fixed.

Regardless of what you have been told about sitting in a garret and writing scripts that would make Rod Serling turn green, most of your work as a showrunner is to communicate that information to other people so that they can execute it within their field of expertise.

One of the great contradictions of the way we make television in the United States is that writers are given managerial control over the entire enterprise... but writers are very often by nature not very good communicators outside the page. Also, talking to people non-stop, all day, with great specificity about a project this size is hard, and tiring. Easier to hide in your office and wait for them to come to you, right?

Well... it is true that not everyone believes that knowing what they want, and reaching out to those who need to know it in order to perform, is a necessity for success in the world of television... and this is the part where they come out from their slimy, shit-stained hole and excuse their lack of vision (or their unwillingness to impart that vision) with a defense I consider to be the most cowardly and thieving seven words in the showrunner's lexicon:

"I'll know it when I see it."

If you ever find yourself saying that, kindly consider the possibility that - and I mean this, from the heart - your impostor syndrome is most likely real and you are, in fact, a shrill, shrieking fraud.

Here's what "I'll know it when I see it" means to me and to everyone who hears it from a showrunner: "I have no original ideas of my own but am perfectly willing to let everyone else spin their wheels and exhaust themselves emotionally and creatively so that I can eventually cherry-pick the best of their genius and claim it for my own."

The field of television is littered with the desiccated husks of eager artists of all stripes - from writers to casting directors, production designers, actors, scenic painters, set builders, and the people who embroider the backs of the chairs - who, in the name of their own honor and work ethic, wore themselves out on the wheel of "I'll know it when I see it"... and the high castles surrounding those fields are occupied by fat, bloated barons who sit on their comfy thrones wondering with great self pity why they can't seem to hire a staff that just "gets it."

When you're a showrunner, it is on you to define the tone, the stakes, the story, and the characters. You are NOT a curator of other people's ideas. You are their motivator, their inspiration, and - ultimately - the person responsible for their implementation.

Bottom line: the creativity of your staff isn't for coming up with your shit for you, it's for making your shit bigger and better once you've come up with it!

To say "I'll know it when I see it" is to abdicate the hard work of creation while egotistically hoarding the authority to declare

what is or isn't good. "I'll know it when I see it" is an act of intellectual theft on par with plagiarism.

Anyone can say "I'll know it when I see it": the writer's ability to MAKE SHIT UP is the reason we, and not the producers or the directors, are the showrunners in American television. To be an effective showrunner, you have to articulate what Maya Lin once referred to as "a strong, clear vision." You have to draw the boundaries of the sandbox with extreme precision, detail, consistency, and integrity.

And you know what? That's hard. It requires intellectual and creative rigor, it requires a measure of non-solipsistic introspection, and it requires that you make a discipline out of talking to other people and being on message at all times.

You know what else? That's your job. Surprise!

Turns out showrunning isn't about sitting alone in a darkened office wrestling your personal demons until they come out on the page as genius. Your job is to communicate a shared vision with enough specificity that everyone understands it, and to then preach it, day in and out, to the point of exhaustion until everyone - from the directors to the actors to the guy who embroiders the back of the chairs - feels it in their soul like a gospel.

And here's the great part of successfully communicating a shared vision: your employees will love you for it.

You can give out jackets with the show's logo. You can send an ice cream truck to the set. You can hand out fifty dollar bills to the assistants in penance for screaming obscenities at them... but that's just bread and circuses. That's bribes.

Loyalty to an employer begins with the knowledge of what the job is. Loyalty comes from knowing that your bosses have your back both in the form of giving out the information necessary to not only do what you do and do it right, and also the empowerment to use your own creativity to try to improve on the baseline.

Loyalty is the product of knowing that the boss trusts you with the crown jewels.

And yes, that's a hard leap of faith for the showrunner to make. Luckily you're a visionary and not an "I'll know it when I see it" person.

Right?

As someone who has squandered hours, days, and weeks - and more than once, months - of his life in the vampiric feeding troughs of several "I'll know it when I see it" showrunners, I am not above hitting below the belt on this one: every time you say "I'll know it when I see it," you're proving daddy right.

THE THIRD LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
ALWAYS DESCRIBE A PATH TO SUCCESS

I know, I know... we're not even a third of the way there and already you have SUCH a headache... being a leader is so tough, and tedious, and you already feel high lonesome for the days when you were young and careless, and could stay up late in your home office, writing your precious little scripts in a nimbus of Red Bull, nicotine, and online porn.

I feel your pain, Sparky, but stick with me here. This one is directly related to the last and a real pattern emerges from here on out. I promise.

Describing a path to success is the natural outgrowth of Know Your Show and Tell Everyone What It Is at All Times. This piece of advice was given to me by John Ziffren - who was a non-writing Executive Producer on my show *The Middleman* - and who strove to create an environment where I could excel in communicating the goals of the show to all comers.

"Always Describe a Path to Success" simply means - in its most practical form - "Do not leave a meeting without letting everyone there know what they are expected to do/deliver next."

The most toxic thing a showrunner can do before leaving the writer's room - or any room, for that matter - is to say "fuck it, I don't know, guys, figure it out." Which is like saying "I'm leaving it up to you losers to disappoint me - go!"

If you tell your staff how to please you, two out of three times they will come back with a way to do exactly what you want. If they can't, they will often come up with a number of better ideas

than the one you pitched out of a desire to address the spirit, if not the letter, of a clear directive.

Every clear directive you issue is a gift to your staff because it relieves them of the duty to go back into their offices, slaughter a lamb, and read the entrails in the hopes that a close examination of their arterial topography will divinely reveal a portent indicating what the fuck it is that you really want.

A clear directive is - once again - an indication of trust. See the pattern emerging here? A clear directive is your way of saying "Here's the hill we have to take. I have taken the time and effort to figure out the goal. I now acknowledge that you have the knowledge and resources to figure out the strategy in a way I cannot."

To successfully define a path to success, you don't even have to know the exact hill to take. The grinding race that is television often means that you yourself may not always know the next goal; but even if you articulate your order as "Help me figure out the next hill to take," or "Let me know what our resources are so that I can make an educated decision about which of all these hills we should attack next," that alone constitutes a directive with a defined outcome.

You will be amazed at how much even that measure of clarity will galvanize a team.

Your job as a showrunner, then, requires that you exert your creativity on the definition of the problems ahead. By doing that job - hard though it may be - what you are doing is to free your staff to do what they do best: dedicate their unique skills to their solution.

THE FOURTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
MAKE DECISIONS EARLY AND OFTEN

As the days, weeks, and months of pre-, pro-, and post-, churn away, you will find that - whether you like it or not, and whether it's in your comfort zone or not - everyone in your sphere constantly solicits decisions from you... and why shouldn't they? It's all about you, right?

And yet, an aversion to making decisions is a massively common ailment in the showrunning trade. As showrunner diseases go,

decision aversion might as well be Non-Hodgkin's, Ebola, and the thing from Jerry's Kids all rolled up into one lethal, morale-destroying, confidence-eroding, life-sucking, uber malady.

Decision-averse management is one of the many offshoots of "I'll know it when I see it"... but unlike its more deleterious cousin, it does come out of an understandable insecurity...

You see, once you make a decision, the world knows where you stand. Once you say "This is what this is," you have made your taste and opinion clear: and the world will judge you.

People will come out of the woodwork with their little notes, and their little suggestions, and their little ideas, and their little improvements... and because you are a socially awkward little writer who wants nothing more than to please daddy, you will feel the need to compromise... and then your vision will be diluted and the world will never know your genius.

Now, I may have said that this insecurity is "understandable." And it is. No one likes to be judged and no one likes to defend their taste: especially when you are already exposing to a national audience what is essentially a dramatic expression of your innermost feelings and desires transformed into a police procedural.

What I also didn't say is that it's also bullshit of the highest order and also conduct unbecoming a showrunner.

Of course, you will now attempt to rationalize your decision aversion as part of the magical process by which you weigh all the options until you happen on the best possible one.

Wrong. Your decision aversion is not proof of your intellectual rigor and uncompromising taste. By and large, and to the great exasperation of many a member of your staff, the option with which the decision-averse showrunner ultimately runs is usually, and most likely, among the first they are pitched.

No. Your decision aversion is a stalling tactic designed to let you have it your way without ruffling too many feathers because you are way too invested in being seen as a "nice person" and a "good boss."

But you know what "nice people" and "good bosses" actually do? They rip off the Band-Aid early, make the case for their

decision, hear out any remaining arguments to a reasonable degree, then shut down the discussion and send everyone off to get on with their work.

Yup. That's what "nice" actually looks like: because while "nice" can mean "affable" and "pleasant," a second definition of "nice" is also "precise and demanding careful attention."

You want to be "nice?" That's the nice to strive for. You could also try and smile a little, Sparky - we've all seen your car on the lot and it's pretty fucking... nice.

Avoiding a decision until the last possible minute while everyone runs themselves ragged coming up with contingency after contingency? That's neither flavor of nice. That's you assuming no one will love you unless you keep them on the leash with the false hope that they may eventually get their way... it's keeping everyone attached from their lips to your buttocks until you finally deign to nut up and do the thing you were going to do anyway, because the show cannot go on until you say what the show is.

Your job is to make ideas come to life. The first step in doing your job is to commit. Commit early. Commit often. Make committing the same as breathing: you might as well do it now, because you will have to do it eventually.

Most importantly, the sooner you make a decision, the sooner you will know from your crew what is achievable, and the sooner they will be able to expand upon - and use their talents to - elevate it. The time you spent not deciding is time you rob from your staff's ability to make whatever the object of the decision the best it can be.

With alarming frequency, I see decision-averse showrunners look at dailies, or a director's cut, and say something like "Man, that set/costume/casting choice/embroidery on the back of that chair sucks. Why does it suck?"

The answer is, invariably, "Oh, I dunno, Sparky, because you waited until the last minute to decide what you wanted and no one had the time to make it the best it could be?"

Of course, you can't say that because the showrunner suffering from this disease doesn't want to feel judged... the decision-averse showrunner wants to be told that there are no casualties

to their perceived search for excellence, and that all would be fine if everyone else were just as rigorous and demanding in their own work.

Invariably, this leads to the eventual firing of the set/costume designer/casting director/back of the chair embroidering guy. It's unfair, it sucks, and now that you have heard it from me, you can't pretend no one ever told you.

And as far as your desire to not be judged goes - toughen up, Sparky. Judgment - like winter - is coming. No matter what you do. Judgment is coming. It comes for the weak. It comes for the strong. It comes for the hacks and the geniuses in equal measure.

So: do you want to go down swinging or do you want to go like a chump?

Make that your first decision.

THE FIFTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
DO NOT DEMAND A FINAL PRODUCT AT THE IDEA STAGE

When you sold your pilot, you didn't take an eight million dollar film of your script to the network meeting with you. You talked the executives through your idea for a series, the characters, and your story for the pilot, and they proceeded to entrust you with millions of dollars to fulfill your vision.

Considering how much the creation of a TV series depends on a studio and network's ability to visualize a bunch of words on the page - or coming out of some writer's mouth - it is terrifying to me how many allegedly seasoned and experienced showrunners lack the simple skill to understand a story when it is pitched to them off note cards on a board.

Another example of this inability to visualize on the conceptual level has taken place on several shows I have worked on... shows in which the staff has had to write, and rewrite *ad nauseum,* thirty to forty page outlines including dialogue in order to convince the showrunner that - as members of the Writers Guild - we have the ability to render in script a scene that, in a note card on the board, or an outline, should be as simply stated as "they meet cute."

(And, later - after micromanaging the concept phase to the exclusion of any and all invention on the part of the episode writer - the showrunners in every one of these shows have invariably had the audacity to complain that the final scripts with which they were presented lacked a certain... oh, I don't know... "flicker of inspiration" and were just "the outlines with more dialogue.")

Architects can see buildings off blueprints. That's their job. Your job as a showrunner is to see the gross anatomy of the stories the writers pitch you off the shorthand of the board. The next step is to visualize even further down the line as the writers refine the muscular, circulatory, and nervous systems in the slightly more detailed treatment of the story, plot, and scenes in an outline, and - if you don't like the shape of the surface once the script come in - for you to give notes and rewrite if necessary.

If, as a showrunner, you repeatedly have to return stories to the board after they have been outlined or scripted for gross anatomy work - or find yourself sending your writers off to script and outline in frustration, only to then rewrite from page one, you may want to consider doing some work on your own ability to create and discern story from the foundations up.

Not all writers have this ability, but it is something that can and should be learned - and which is crucial to making television - because the physical production of the scripts depends on the departments having consistent, and accurate communication from the writers office as to what is coming down the pike.

Problem is, a lot of showrunners - especially those who do not come from television and did most of their gestational work alone and outside of the collaborative environment of the writers room - hate the writers room.

They hate the panoply of voices, and they hate having to occasionally quiet them for fear of being seen as "not a nice guy." They also hate the leap of faith that comes from hearing a story told to them in strokes bolder than the fine grain of a script - and they also having to take subsequent leap of faith that the writers will render the story in a way that matches their voice exactly.

What a lot of these showrunners wind up doing is either protracting the story breaking process - asking for such detail

in the story break that the writers room becomes a compulsive-obsessive death march that snuffs out all of the creativity that would eventually happen when the writer finally faces the blank page - or simply punting on the writers room altogether.

Many an incompetent showrunner simply retreats to a position where he or she accepts a story from the writers room only in the boldest of strokes - declaring approval in the same way a wild animal caught in a bear trap chews off its own arm in exchange for freedom - only to then rewrite everything from page one when the script comes in... again, to the detriment not just of the writers, who feel that they were sent off on a fool's errand, but also of all the people who need to know what's actually going to go in front of the camera in order build, produce, and rehearse it.

One of things increasingly lost as showrunners are no longer asked to work their way up the ranks in the television hierarchy is a comfort level with collaboration in the form of the writers room, and a knowledge of story - usually born of coming up with one story after another on other people's shows. It is from this longitudinal experience of collaboration and story generation that most showrunners learn how to visualize from the blueprint level.

How, then, if you do not come from a lifetime of conference and teamwork, but find yourself forced into collusion with a writers room - whom you need, if for no other reason, to generate the sheer volume of material the show demands - do you develop this skill?

The answer is simple. Trust.

You trust that the extremely expensive staff of professionals you hired - and which the studio pays extremely well (some of them earn almost as much as you do!) can actually... you know... write.

You trust that a writer who pitches you "meet cute" on a note card on the board can actually write a decent "meet cute" and doesn't have to act it our for you in the room - because, let's face it, few of us are actors and the room ain't exactly The Groundlings Theater.

Just like you, dear showrunner, other writers occasionally need to retire to their keyboards to do their job to the fullest - and

because you will decide whether or not they have to be fired after they turn their draft, they are profoundly invested in doing a good job...

Just know that you are not the audience, you are the chief designer and architect. Sure, you can demand to be "entertained" by work that feels complete in its gestational phase, but know that the inevitable product of that demand is that will you be bored by it by the time it reaches your desk as a script because you will have effectively destroyed a crucial part of your staff's creative process...

And, ironically, it's the part of the process that most showrunners guard jealously for themselves...

THE SIXTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
WRITE AND REWRITE QUICKLY

Okay, Sparky - this one's gonna be harsh... so I'm gonna start by smearing Vaseline on your ass, putting a fresh clean diaper on top, and telling you everything's going to be all right.

Yes, your scripts - as well as the ones you rescue from your nasty, overpaid and underachieving writers who don't "get it" - are, in fact an expression of your fragile soul. That's right - and they must be protected at all cost from the judgments of all the bad people in the world who want to turn your special and precious little show into something vulgar and gaudy.

You know what else a script is? A work order.

Without a complete script, no one can decide where they are going to take the trucks with all the lights and cameras and costumes, and for how long. Without a script, no one can figure out how much it's going to cost to make this episode of your series. Without a script, the actors can't prepare themselves for their work in front of the camera.

A script is the final and most specific description of the work that is ahead of the production for several weeks to come. If you procrastinate - or hold your precious to your bosom like Gollum - NO. ONE. KNOWS. WHAT. THEIR. JOB. IS.

And there's someone else who needs to read your work on the page to understand their job. Your writers.

Think about it. A studio has given you millions of dollars to hire a large staff of people whose mission is to learn how to produce work that reads and sounds like your voice: the voice that you convinced a network and a studio was worth a loan in the tens of millions to realize a television series.

Reproducing that voice is a primary facet of your writing staff's work; the best and most efficient way they can do that is by reading your prose and dialogue. The faster you write and deliver material to your team, the sooner they can integrate your voice into the process... and the faster you rewrite their work, the faster they can internalize your changes to their work into the matrix of that learning process.

For most competent writers working under the exigencies of a television season, a week and a half is considered ample time to write the first draft of a script from a solid story break and outline... and yet, showrunners routinely avail themselves of an unconscionable span of time to write their own scripts... especially when that script is a tone-setting season premiere. On at least three different shows, I have spent some eight weeks along with the rest of the writing staff, spinning our wheels trying to break story and create further narrative, wile waiting for the showrunner to write a season premiere.

During that time, the show's writers are invariably ordered by the showrunner to launch into their own scripts (as studio, network, and production demand to know what exactly is going on and why the pipeline isn't yielding new material) and without fail, those scripts are eventually judged as inferior in light of all the new "discoveries" made by the showrunner during their lengthy retreat into their "creative process" - a retreat for which everyone winds up paying in time, wasted creative energy, and time-filling busywork.

In one particularly catastrophic incident, the two-hour season premiere of a major network series had to be, almost literally, forcibly seized by the network's president after two months of the showrunner comma-fucking his draft... only to be ultimately revealed as so unfilmably divergent from what the showrunner had promised that it had to be junked entirely.

A replacement two-hour season premiere had to be written over the course of five business days and a weekend by all the other writers on the staff, each taking fifteen page segments of the

script. Once assembled, the results were predictably patchy. The writers never recovered from the delay, the show never really found its voice, the season was poorly received, and the series never recovered.

In the other cases, the showrunners merely emerged from their cozy little garret after neglecting their writers room for weeks on end, only to deliver exactly the story that had been broken by the staff on the board, and then pitched to the network and studio, and outlined. Much to everyone's shock and horror, our leaders had availed themselves of two months to accomplish what we would all be expected to do in less than a week per writer per draft for the remainder of the year.

Yup. Real morale booster.

So here's the brass tacks, Sparky: your show's scripts, as written - or rewritten - by you are your most effective tool in your performance of the Second Law. You can't talk to everyone at all times, and eventually, you have a responsibility to take your talk from the theoretical to the real.

That's what a script ultimately represents: the concretization of your voice and gesture. A script is the closest thing there can be to a finished product until you have a final cut. A script is your proof of concept, and if its fate is to fail that proof, then you are better off knowing sooner rather than later, so that you - and all of your employees - can go to work on fixing what's broken and right the ship while there is still time.

Scripts are not just the cry of your wounded inner child - and those of the writers in your employ, by they way - but also the most crucial and efficient form of communication between cast, crew, studio, and network available to you. Write them quickly, rewrite them impassively and efficiently. Work your scripts until they are ready, but recognize that in a fast-moving business like television, most of the time they will only be ready enough.

Your best ideas will survive criticism, the worst ones... well, let's just say that there's no amount of rework that can keep them alive, and that it may not be worth fighting so hard for every single one of your precious children anyway, because the horizon is full of other children, all of whom need your immediate attention and will quickly make you forget the ones you've had to leave behind...

THE SEVENTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
TRACK MULTIPLE TARGETS EFFICIENTLY BY DELEGATING RESPONSIBILITY

In the 1980's, the members of the Berlin Symphony told joke about their notoriously imperious conductor, Herbert Von Karajan. It went like this: The *maestro* gets into a taxi. The driver asks "Where to?" "It doesn't matter," Von Karajan declaims, "I'm needed EVERYWHERE!"

With or without the colossal arrogance, that is one of the essential truths of showrunner life. This is why understanding the First Law, and practicing the Second, are so important. As the CEO of your own startup corporation, you are responsible for every facet of the production of your series: yes, even the embroidery on the back of the chairs.

And though the writers room - the forge of your show's creation - is the single most important place in the universe as far as you should be concerned, everything conspires to keep you away from it.

(Let me add here that if you don't think the writers room is the single most important place in the world for you to be, you're wrong. Unless you're by nature a monomaniac, masochist, or misanthrope: the kind of insecure buffoon who needs constant proof that "no one gets it but me". You're not alone in this fallacy, however, and can have a long and storied career of making great television while avoiding the writers room and all those horrible little writers in it: those trolls who constantly debate everything until they choke the life out of it... mostly because you have taught them to behave that way by dint of never making a decision. One showrunner - another multiple award-winner whose work I guarantee you respect and admire - once told me in a meeting that "The writers room is where lazy people go to hide from real work." After I tried to divest him of this stupidity, he proceeded to not hire me and went on to win an Emmy. Go figure.)

At any given moment during the course of a television season, there are five stories that have to be minded: the story in development on the board in the writers room, the story in outline, the story being scripted, the story being shot, and the story being completed in editing and post production.

That means meetings. Costume meetings, set decoration meetings, hair and make-up meetings, budget meetings, casting concept calls, network and studio notes calls on multiple drafts of multiple scripts, outlines, and stories, sound and special effects spotting in post-production... enough meetings to wear down even the most extroverted mass-communicator.

And yet, your job is to track all those targets. And never forget that to accurately and proactively communicate the theme, look, and style of your show to all these people at all times is the Second Law of Showrunning... but you do have a secret weapon in your arsenal designed exactly to combat the fatigue that comes from always having someone at your door who needs to be told what is what.

That weapon is, of course, your writers.

It turns out that your writers are not, in fact, a parliament of meanies whose job it is to take no end of pleasure in getting your vision wrong on the page while endlessly explaining to you in the room that your shit stinks.

Though you don't realize it just yet, your writers are, in fact, your apostles.

Yes... believe it or not, that motley and smelly bunch of malcontents you keep trying to avoid is - in reality - a misfit band of spiritual warriors ready to spread your Evangel to every corner of your show's domain. Believe it or not, that's their actual job!

The reason the ranking system of writers goes from staff writer, to story editor, to executive story editor, to co-producer, producer, supervising producer, and co-executive producer, is because you're not just running a show - you're also running a producer/showrunner academy (and even if you are woefully uninterested in teaching/under qualified to teach this discipline, this is the duty that fate has thrust upon you).

The way you run a producer/showrunning academy is by making the writers in the room the privileged bearers of your knowledge of What The Show Is and then sending them off to all these meetings to be give a voice to your unique vision.

The reason the Second Law is so important is that, once you use it to empower your people to spread the Word, it actually takes stress and labor off your hands... I know, right?

Tracking multiple targets is difficult. Not just "whiny bitch" difficult, but actually physically and emotionally draining. It is a nigh-insurmountable, and ever-rising, Everest of work.

As an exhausted showrunner once confided to me that "What they never tell you is that the job really is bigger than any one person." Not only is he spot on, but it is for that exact same reason that, over decades of television history, a system evolved by which a team of highly creative people were put in a privileged position of access to the seat of power and knowledge.

All you have to do is share with your writer/producers/ showrunners-in-training What You Want, then send them off to all the meetings, and have them report back... and here's the beauty part of all this: it's not as if you have to give up your command authority and surrender all of your ego, you only have to surrender a tiny little bit for a tiny little amount of time.

Remember the First Law, and remember that there will always be a final meeting on all these matters before the scenes are shot.

That's right, Sparky, you can always change your mind! Shiny!

Why should you ask for help tracking multiple targets? Because it all begins with the story - that's why - and you need to focus your energy on making sure that the stories are developed to your satisfaction from the ground up.

The more your stories represent the purest version of your vision, the more involved will be your writers knowledge of that vision, and the better your scripts are going to convey the vision to everyone else involved with the production (as well as the outlying regions, like the people who cut your promos at the network, or the people who license the show for merchandising. And yes, I'm sorry to report that the process by which your stories portray your world view with great and specific passion and clarity happens in the place you hate most: the writers room.

Even if you successfully defeat your inner control freak and efficiently convey your message - and your writers carry it out without any signal degradation, and your orders are performed to the letter - you still have the daunting task of charting the

creative course of a season of up to twenty-four episodes. As I said at the beginning, that means you have a story in development in the room, a story in outline, a story being written, a story being produced, and a story in post production.

Those are the most important of your multiple targets - and part of your job is to free your mental bandwidth to make sure they are right from jump street, and that you muster the necessary fortitude and stamina to work with the denizens of the writers room - annoying though they may be.

This is why conveying your vision clearly, and delegating the conveyance of that vision to others is so important.

Now, if you do all that, and you still can't simultaneously work on the story in development, the two stories on the page, the story on the set, and the story in post production without becoming confused and cranky... you might want to consider becoming a novelist.

THE EIGHTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
RESIST THE SIREN CALL OF THE "SEXY GLAMOROUS JOBS" ESPECIALLY POST-PRODUCTION SERIOUSLY. STAY AWAY FROM POST-PRODUCTION FOR AS LONG AS HUMANLY POSSIBLE

We are in the business of entertaining people. It then stands to reason that many facets of the process of entertaining people are entertaining in and of themselves... especially when the alternative to these amusements is to skulk into a room full of lousy, ungrateful writers sitting around, waiting for you to tell them how to tell your story.

And what's fun about that? The writers are shouty, and judgy, and kinda - what's the best way of saying this? - possessing of their own individual identities and preoccupations that have nothing to do with you. They don't appreciate your unique genius like they should, the room stinks of take-out food and desperation, and the stories don't even exist yet!

In that room, you have to figure out everything from scratch, and make sure that one scene causes the next, and that the design of the entire season arc makes logical sense, and that the dozens of characters in the series are having complicated emotions.

It's hard!

You know where's fun? The place where they make the costumes. Oh - it's awesome over there. They have drawings of pretty girls on the walls, the costumers are frequently young and attractive - and have a great sense of style and design - and, every once in a while, beautiful actors come in and put on a fashion show for you!

The same applies for the production design and prop fabrication offices - festooned as they are with blueprints, concept art, fabric samples, and awesome gizmos in various stages of construction. And if you like that, wait 'til you hit the VFX office, where the boffins will regale you with endless, and gallantly woven, tales of pre-vis and fluid dynamics simulations!

Oh, and then there's casting. That's where you can hear actors come in and say your lines in every manner possible... imagine that: pretty people come in and say your beautiful words back to you, and you get to JUDGE them with impunity!

These are what I call "the sexy, glamorous jobs." You can convince yourself that your direct supervision of these tasks is of the essence... especially if you are stuck on a difficult story knot and the other writers keep telling you the direction you want to go isn't going to untangle it.

There's another pernicious aspect to becoming too enamored of the sexy glamorous jobs: the longer you spend with your other departments - exploring all the options, deferring your decisions, being generally unclear about your aesthetic goals, and being dazed by all the pretty pictures people are showing you - the more you rob from them the time they need to actually do their job: the designing and construction of things that will look great before the camera and not just sound great in your conversation...

And, by and large, most of them will be too nice to tell you to go away and let them work.

That's one of the reasons it's so pleasant for the showrunner to go to a lot of these meetings outside the writers room. Unlike the writers - whose role as creative partners and your closest advisors gives them some leave to call you out on your shit - most of the other departments cannot.

Remember, they know damn well you can fire anyone who displeases you - and they are petrified that you will throw a hand grenade into the work they have already completed - so they will indulge your conversational needs and make you feel like you're a wit on par with Oscar Wilde, and the Second Coming of Joss Whedon. That's part of the siren song of the sexy glamorous jobs.

So don't be a Time Bandit (or a "Time Vampire," both terms used by staffers I have known to describe malingering showrunners seeking refuge from the the writers room). Tell people what you want concisely and efficiently... and then <u>leave</u>...

Or better yet, tell one of your writer/producers what you want, let them have the discussion with the different department heads first, and then make course corrections later when there's an adequate level of proof of concept.

All of this brings me to post-production.

There was a time when post-production was the most ignored and insular department in TV production. The mechanics by which episodes were edited and finished were analog, artisanal, and very painstaking and time-consuming in a way wholly incompatible with the fast pace of television production: literally requiring the splicing of bits of film with sticky tape by hobbits working in moist, mossy caves.

Back then, an episode would have to be edited, then screened in a theater for the showrunner and producers, who would give their notes either verbally or via memos, and then the film would be sent back to the hobbits, who would meticulously (no, seriously, they had to wear gloves) pull the strips of film apart from the sticky tape, re-cut the film by hand to make the necessary adjustments, splice the entire kit and kaboodle back together with more sticky tape, and then screen it again for everyone's approval.

In the late twentieth century - thanks to advances in computer software and memory, and the development of the non-linear/non-destructive editing workflow - post-production changed from a fairly recondite process to becoming the single most seductive time suck for showrunners seeking refuge from their actual job.

As anyone who has ever used iMovie can tell you, picture editing is now like having a word processor for a movie - a movie that you wrote (or rewrote and thus rescued from mediocrity)!

Honestly, there's a reason I refer to it as a siren's call - if Narcissus were a showrunner, the editing room would be his reflecting pool.

A showrunner can now go into the editing suite (usually a warmly lit, air-conditioned room with a large leather couch put there to appease the local Hutts, and massive high-definition screens with a pipeline to the editing system) and watch an episode, a sequence, a scene - even a single sequence of shots - over and over again, and demand any change that enters his/her mind... and, thanks to the miracle of computerized cut-and-paste and endless levels of "undo" and "redo" see it all in real time, and continue to demand changes until every combination of every frame that was shot has been considered.

(Not to mention that with all that raw computing power, you can spend days choosing just the right temp soundtrack, and putting in makeshift VFX and titles and transitions - and basically creating something amazingly polished that almost looks like a real TV show...)

It's like getting ACTUAL work done.

Only it's not.

Really. It isn't. It only looks that way.

Though a humongous boon to the art and craft of television, the rise of non-linear/non-destructive post-production has also created an entire class of parasitic troglodytes (usually non-writing producers desperate to justify their meddling ways) who rally under the despicable war cry of "I'm GREAT in post!"

You wanna know what the words "I'm GREAT in post" in the mouth of most producers are really dog whistle code for? "I will gladly sit on that leather couch for an eternity and hound your helpless editor into an assisted suicide."

I mean it. Someone invented the AVID and the next thing you know, everyone and their mother is Pablo fuckin' Ferro. It stinks.

That's not to mean that there aren't producers - writing and non-writing - who are, in fact, GREAT in post. There are, and their contribution is invaluable. They are also a small, and gifted, and rare species. Kind of like unicorns and shootable first drafts.

If you are a showrunner and you're wondering whether or not you're great in post, then you probably aren't.

If you are a showrunner and you find a non-writing producer who is demonstrably great in post, then hire them, pay them well, and use them to keep you out of the editing bay for as long as possible.

Look. I get it. Eventually, all showrunners will have to spend some time sitting on that leather couch frame-fucking the work. We're messianic visionaries with an idiosyncratic "creative process," and it's inevitable.

The trick to maintaining a healthy balance between the editing room and the writers room is to not fool yourself into thinking that post-production is where the show truly is - and to recognize that, more often than not, post is where the fearful go to hide from their writers.

The most egregious offender I have encountered in this respect was a showrunner (yes, another one whose work I guarantee you respect and admire) had a ratio of hours spent in editing versus time spent in the writers room that was easily ten to one. When asked about this, the showrunner would insist that he had to spend all that time in editing because that's how his "creative process" worked. In his own words, he needed that time in editing to "find the show."

Had I not needed that job as the result of a very ill-advised condo purchase, I might have politely suggested that he was looking for the show in the wrong place... and perhaps added that if he spent more time in the writers room (you know, where the show is actually created) he might not need to spend so much in editing trying to reverse-engineer "the show" in his mind into "the show" that was actually filmed.

The result of this showrunner's contempt for the writers room - and his insistence on dwelling in the editing room - was a vicious cycle. Having only enough endurance for us trolls to sign off on the broadest strokes of a story, the showrunner was setting up every one of his writers to fail: a situation exacerbated by his being an extremely tough and punitive grader. The showrunner would invariably throw out multiple scripts a season, and "fix" the ones he only hated enough to rewrite from page one with whatever ideas came to his increasingly fatigued

mind. The showrunner would then wait for the film, and retreat to post-production to "find" the episode. Rinse and repeat.

So how do you mitigate the siren call? By keeping your eye on the story, and by delegating to those who know the story best the task of making sure that the cut has been maximized toward the telling of the story before you step into the editing room (you would be surprised at how often a director's cut - which is always the first cut shown to the writer/producers per union rules - prioritize the director's visual flair over more prosaic concerns like pacing and clarity of narrative).

So let's say you're the showrunner and the director's cut has just been finished. Instead of going into the editing room to watch it from the leather couch - and start frame fucking before the theme music kicks up - watch it on a DVD in your office with the editor and the episode writer. Have a thorough discussion with them as to whether the scenes are telling the story (concerns of style and flair can wait until the story is solid) while an assistant takes notes, and then send the editor off to perform the notes.

When the editor is ready with the next iteration of the episode, do NOT look at it. Send the writer of the episode in to look at the next cut and let him or her decide whether the notes were addressed and give the next round of feedback: again, focussing on whether or not the film is telling the story.

Only after you've allowed these steps to take place - maybe more than once - should you get on the leather couch and make it sing. When you begin to work this way, you may feel like you're abandoning a child during a crucial developmental stage, but I promise you - what you are doing is giving the children being conceived a fighting chance at life.

Now, just because I am an advocate of delegating to your staff doesn't mean I am blind to the truth that even a person of your impeccable good taste and judgment could, potentially make a bad staffing decision here and there. Purely accidentally, of course.

It is a sad truth that not all of your hires may be up to the tasks you assign for them, but before you break out the pink slips, you may want to consider...

THE NINTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING

EXPECT YOUR WRITERS TO PERFORM AT VARYING LEVELS OF COMPETENCE

As I mentioned previously, you are not just running a corporation, but also a spoke of the apprentice-to-master wheel which many of your writers will ride all the way to becoming senior level writer/producers and showrunners themselves. You may neither want - nor be qualified, or fitted by temperament - to be a teacher and a mentor, but, as that poignant, and now-classic, song goes, "Whoomp, there it is."

Among the many keys to being a successful mentor is the understanding that - when you have a room full of writers of different ranks and levels of ability - they will all perform on the page, and in the writers room, differently.

The executive producer-level writer with twenty-five years of experience - the person who ran his or her own show last year and is now on your staff as your Number Two - should be reliably expected to turn in drafts in which the scene structures will be solid, the characters will speak with a voice close to what you have established (provided you have been following the Second Law with some measure of diligence), and the dialogue will sparkle with not only style and brio, but also reflect in every movement the emotional state of the characters as you have designed it for not just the one episode, but also the sweep of the series. You may not ultimately like this writer's execution of the material - that part is subjective - but you should have no doubt upon reading their work that you are in the hands of a pro.

This is what your senior level writer/producer has been doing for twenty-five years: learning how to solve story problems in script, mastering the craft of creating scenes that have a discrete beginning, middle, and end - perhaps with a memorable button/punch-line - figuring out how to weave the prosaic concerns of plot and theme into dialogue that conceals the storytelling machinery beneath, and gaining mastery over all of the different patterns by which scenes ebb and flow into one another... all in the service of giving you - the showrunner - a reading experience that will not only sound to you like your own voice, but like your own voice peppered with the mastery of an accomplished craftsman skilled in the ways of hiding his or her own genius so well that you mistake it for your own.

The assistant who got to share a story credit last season, and whom you promoted to staff writer a week ago as a reward for their loyalty, hard work, and support - and because you read a

spec script of theirs that you don't really know how long they took to write (or how much input they had from others in its creation) - cannot be expected to deliver on that level. It's on you to not only budget your time and energy accordingly to give thoughtful notes and rewrite their material, but also to muster the largesse to judge their work more leniently and recognize where that beginning-level writer has performed at, or above and beyond, their level of skill.

To most showrunners, this seems exceptionally unfair... and it is, to be honest, something of a damned nuisance. After all, staff writers have as much freedom to share their opinion and ideas in the colloquium of the writers room (and, frankly, many denizens of the lower levels avail themselves of that right way too freely when what they should be doing is shutting the fuck up and learning). Hell, just yesterday one of the staff writers had the audacity to suggest that one of your ideas wasn't all that good - and they didn't even have the good taste to pitch something with which to replace it! So why is it on you to grade them on a curve?

Because it's on you to help them achieve the level of mastery where their scripts look and read like those of the twenty-five year veteran. That's why. Just like it's also on you to make them responsible citizens of the writers room, and suggest to them when it's OK to criticize and when to hold back.

Similarly, the process by which you give notes to your writers isn't some cargo cult where you park a script to spin its palm-frond-and-coconut turboprops until you have the time to save it with your rewriting genius. The better and more well-considered your feedback and tutelage, the better the scripts your writers will produce. And it isn't some glacial process: give your staff the most accurate and specific information about what you want, and the most constructive feedback as to the how and why (and yes, describing to them WHAT to write counts - don't think they will resent your telling them exactly what you want the scene to look/sound like), and you will see marked improvement from script to script.

Funny how simple that sounds, and yet, many showrunners just can't wrap their heads around that concept. Sometimes it's just more expedient and less exhausting to give a younger writer a bunch of busywork until you find the time to fix it yourself.

It's also wrong, and a disservice to your trade.

But do it you must... and, hey, at the end of the season, or the conclusion of the writers' contracts - you can always fire those writers who don't "get it"...

But you know what you DON'T get to do? (Well, you can do it all you want, actually - most showrunners do - but you can't call yourself "a human being" in my book if you do.) You don't get to read the staff writer's first draft - oftentimes the first thing this person has written under the time and content restrictions of a writing staff - and say "wow, they just don't 'get it' and I'm going to fire them."

You hired them. You teach them.

More work, Sparky, I know. But... as the now-classic song taught us all: "It's hard out here for a pimp."

The flip side of the atrocities described above is the following ubiquitous and nasty little bit of stupidity - usually perpetrated by showrunners who wrongheadedly fancy themselves "men of the people" - the privileging of notes and feedback from "trusted" outsiders over that of experienced professionals.

One showrunner for whom I worked a few years back insisted that they could not finalize a script until they got notes from the line cook at his childhood hometown diner... it was his way of making sure he stayed "real."

While this was the most extreme version of this delusion that I have encountered, it's not that far on the end of the spectrum from the many, many showrunners who believed that bullshit some other successful showrunner once said in a WGA magazine interview about "the best idea should win, I don't care WHERE it comes from," and shows this fealty to their trade unionist roots by continually calling in the twenty-five year old who runs the phones in the reception area to tell the twenty-five year veteran "that idea you had the other day about how to make this script better."

Though my harsh response to this scenario - which I have encountered to a vomitous extreme over the length of my career (hell, I was once the twenty-five year-old in question, I thought it was awesome to be consulted, and later paid for the favor in blood) - may, on the surface seem like the parochial upholding of

hierarchical entitlement by a threatened old-timer, here's why it's a horrible thing to do...

A. By the time a pitch/outline/script comes to you, the writers room has undoubtedly discussed it to every possible endgame: <u>that's their job</u>. The assistant's idea may sound great on the face of it, but you were probably in post-production when it came up in the room and was considered. More likely than not, it was already tossed around, taken for a test drive, kicked on the tires, and judged wanting for reasons that you have not yet had the time to consider.
B. You have also - and whether you think this is the more senior writer being too sensitive, you did it anyway - told the person whom you should be trusting with the stewardship of your vision that you, frankly, don't really trust them all that much with the stewardship of your vision. It's a tone-deaf, disempowering, rookie mistake that - more often than not - indicates a pattern of disrespect and disempowerment.
C. You have sent the message that it's OK for a young and inexperienced person to speak out against a superior. That's is not a sin necessarily, but applied capriciously and frequently, it does breed in the writers room a weird entitlement in which junior members of the staff wind up holding back the process because they now believe they have authority above their position. You wonder why the room feels so spiky, and is so full of Napoleonic junior writers who have so high an esteem for their own criticism of your ideas? Wonder, instead, whether you are encouraging this behavior.
D. You have put the younger member of the hierarchy in the awkward position of being shut down in front of you - the supreme leader - by another one of his/her mentors. It's a scenario in which everyone loses face and feels like shit except for you. You get to go on with your life thinking you're a "man of the people" because everyone is too afraid to tell you otherwise... but the truth is, the younger member of the staff hates you for making them pitch to someone who now wants to punch you in the face by proxy by punching them in the face... and the cycle continues.
E. You are perpetuating the fiction that you are a "nice person" and a "good boss" when what you are in fact doing is privileging the counsel of people whose power differential with yours is so steep that they will <u>never actually question your decisions in a productive way</u>. You think you are fomenting the genius of the precocious and prodigious, but what you are in fact doing is creating a cult of personality in the form of skewed, dysfunctional mentor/mentee

relationships that will damage the conduct and career of your charges down the line.

Now let's say that the young man or woman who answers the phones in the front office comes to you with an idea that you do find undeniable and beguiling. How do you present it to your staff without triggering the apocalypse of awkwardness described above?

You give the note yourself without the youngling in the room - if it succeeds the tests, you then graciously give credit to the youngling, also preferably without them in the room, and then later let them know that their idea is being used and that everyone knows where it came from. If the idea is proven to have already been talked about and discarded - and you realize you yourself are behind the mainstream of the creative process in your own room by pitching it - you take it on the chin, shrug it off as a brain fart and move on. Showrunners never loses face when they admit to a brain fart - in fact, it makes them kind of adorbs.

Conversely, if you are the youngest/least experienced/lowest-ranked writer on a staff and have an objection to the work of a more senior writer (and am only giving this advice here because it behooves showrunners to teach this kind of behavior), and have an idea as to how you might fix it (if you don't, you are - in the words of the Dowager Countess - about as useful as a glass hammer), then run your criticism/idea by the next person from you in the hierarchy... and maybe then go with that person to the next person up. You build consensus, insure that the ground under your feet is solid, and then throw the hand grenade.

These last two points do bring up one, frequently very difficult managerial conundrum - what do you do when your writers room truly includes a bad apple? Does that fall under the rubric of "expecting writers to behave at different levels of competence?"

Actually, it absolutely does - but that doesn't mean you have to tolerate it, and there are a lot of very useful strategies to mitigate the damage done by negative actors in your staff. Let's begin by identifying the three most common kinds of bad apples that show up in writers staffs and rooms:

1. The "Doctor No" - A writer who responds most ideas that are not theirs with "that sucks" and then proceeds to let everyone know - usually in breathtakingly explicit detail - how and why the idea sucks... usually without providing any concrete

advice about how to fix the problem. Especially cancerous Doctor Noes will sometimes make a practice of coming back days - or even weeks - after the idea has been accepted and put to work in the DNA of the story and bringing things to a grinding halt by explaining why it sucks, of course, never offering any helpful hints as to how to actually... you know... fix the problem.

2. The "Hostage Taker" - Sometimes, Doctor Noes take such pleasure oraculating about their objections that they cross the line into Hostage Taker. I once had the misfortune of running a room in which the local Doctor No, upon making his objections clear, would - if they were not immediately, and diligently addressed by the rest of the staff as a hot rush life-or-death crisis - put on a hundred yard pout, whip out a cellphone, and conspicuously play Doodle Jump while emitting as many Huffs and Snorts as necessary to ensure that no one could move forward without acknowledging his displeasure. Another brand of hostage-taking, not related to Doctor No-ism, comes from the writer who mistakes the safe and open environment of the ideal room - to which its participants should be able to bring their personal business, within the understood parameters of it being germane and additive to the story - for their own psychotherapy session/PhD thesis defense. For these hostage takers, time is a Philip Glassian concept, the sound of their own voice is Black Tar Heroin.
3. The Politician/Manipulator/Insulter - This, of course, refers to those people who, through either tone deafness, a desire to be heard and provoke at any cost the laughter and delight that daddy never found in their wit, or just plain old-fashioned sociopathic malice, use information divulged in the open forum of the writers room to either publicly or privately hurt, undermine, make a punchline out of the other writers. This disease can be especially pernicious, because the room runs on a certain amount of trust and sensitivity, and repairing that trust is an exponential investment of time from the speed with which it can be broken. Sometimes, this brand of Bad Apple-ism cannot be corrected: some assholes just love the feeling of power that comes from Making Others Feel Like Shit.

The strategies you need to correct these problems are simple, and straightforward. Oftentimes the people doing these things do not realize that they are doing them - showrunning is so full of incompetent senior management that many people will go through entire careers without realizing that they are behaving badly.

Correcting bad behavior is one of your jobs, even if most showrunners don't do it because it requires... gulp... confrontation. Here are the five simplest ways of clearing your barrels of the Bad Apples...

1. Throw the problem back at Doctor No - This one is simple, easy, and works 95% of the time. Doctor No tells you that they disapprove of something, you tell them "You break it, you bought it." Your perception of a problem is worse than useless if you do not have a fix. If you can pitch an objection, but not a solution, you have not earned the right to speak: as showrunner, you get to express that to your writers, first in the most polite way possible, and then in escalating levels of exasperation until it sticks. In rooms I have run, I simply make a declaration of this early and often - you don't get to criticize if you don't show up in overalls with a toolbox. More importantly, expressing this is an important part of your job as a teacher: most writers' critical faculty develops earlier than the more craft-focused, patience-requiring, spade-and-trowel discipline of story generation and repair. If you don't correct this behavior early and often, you are causing yourself and other showrunners a lot more trouble down the line.
2. Confront the problem early, head on, and earnestly - You may think that you have to come up with an artful way of bringing up a difficult interpersonal issue to a staff member. Guess what? You don't. Leave the florid writing and brilliant scene structures for the page. If someone is chronically hijacking the room, tell them firmly, but politely (and preferably privately) that "You have a tendency to overshare, it's not always useful, and it undermines the times when what you have to say helps move the story forward," or "You need to watch the jokes about people's personal lives, they come across as hurtful," or (and this was once said to me - and to this day, I thank the bearer of this statement) "Your graphic descriptions of your self-loathing and body image issues are making the other writers uncomfortable, you may want to take your hand off the throttle." Life is not a script, and you don't have to excessively artful - or artfully impolite and cruel - to tell people what you need from them. If they push back, don't engage or become defensive, hear them out, and let them know that they have been heard but that - their defense notwithstanding - you have identified the problem and want it worked on. This is often a crucial aspect of problem-solving: <u>a lot of people just want to know that they are on the record, even if it doesn't change the outcome</u>. Remember, you're not

paid to be anyone's best friend, and you're not a Man of the People: you're the boss. If the pushback becomes so strident that you soon realize this person will not be taught, then there's always the nuclear option:

3. Exile - The Doctor No I described above eventually proved so unwilling to step back on the endless, process-killing objections about the quality of the show - and the capacity of the writing staff to address them - that it was eventually necessary to figure out a better use for his talent. This writer was given scene writing assignments on multiple by the showrunner - who genuinely valued his work on the page - and kept out of the writers room altogether. Over the course of several shows, I have often seen incorrigibly narcissistic Hostage Takers sent to perform producorial services on the set - where a willingness to argue, clarify, and pontificate is often a boon instead of a liability. So much of what happens on the set is about clarifying, especially for the actors, the context of the work at hand, that these hostage-takers often blossom there. This is not an optimal solution: writers are paid to write and contribute ideas, but sometimes, writers are so incompatible with the collaborative process that you may find yourself cornered into having to find an alternate use for their talents, at least until you can let them go, and they can be hired in another show that might have a culture more suited to their personal style.
4. Discuss the problem with your closest subordinate, have them deal with it in one of the ways described above, and save your intervention as a court of final appeal - The reason a twenty-five year veteran is being well-paid to be your right hand is because they bring the experience and weight to deal with problems like this. Use them - decide which of you is to be the good cop, which of you is to be the bad cop, let them deal with the problem, have their back, and if the recalcitrant writer insists on no changing, use the power of your office to reinforce the message at a later time.
5. Fire their time-sucking ass - Sometimes, there's just no two ways about it. Firing people sucks. I've done it and it's nowhere as satisfying as it looks on *The Apprentice*. It's stressful and emotionally draining. The merciful way (once you have dotted all your i's and crossed all your t's with the studio's HR) is to rip off the Band-Aid and be done with it, then everyone can move on.

I know, Sparky, it's all so complicated. Like court machinations in the Ming Dynasty. Can't we all just be comrades and equals? One person, one vote?

No. We can't.

We all want to pretend there's geniuses and prodigies in all of the inexperienced people we hire - mostly because it bolsters the idea that we ourselves came from the ranks of the genial and prodigious. The truth is, however, that you gain mastery over the form and function of television in the same way that chess players master their game: by studying old games, internalizing the patterns, and practicing, practicing, practicing. Lay-people mistake both chess and writing as explosions of genius-level creativity - but where does the black powder for that explosion come from?

It comes from pattern recognition. That's why the twenty-five year veteran is usually so good at the job of breaking story, even if the younger writers demonstrate a greater flair for dialogue, or can render the rhythms of the current popular culture with greater fidelity. Veterans don't have to reinvent the wheel every time out. The veteran looks at the notecards on the board and recognizes the ten different ways the game can go from that point to a win, or a draw, or a defeat.

There are only so many variations in chess and in story telling - the reason you rely on the experience of the veteran is that they don't have to play every variation in order to predict how to reach the outcome you want. The art of writing is in how you disguise the mechanics of this assembly, just as the art of chess comes from fooling your opponent into not seeing your endgame thirty moves ahead.

You may be tempted by the idea of a cabinet of equals, marching in lockstep and doing what's best for the creative process - but your job is to lead and to teach, not to be loved. You earn love by recognizing that everyone's gifts are different and giving your employees an environment in which is it safe to try, and to both succeed and fail.

Every member of a writing staff is, in some way, on the hook for the education of the next person below them; recognizing that everyone is working at a different level is your first step toward building camaraderie. All that pretending that all animals are equal ever gets to is the embarrassing revelation that some are more equal than others, and to you looking like an asshole.

Hierarchy is not a dirty word. Hierarchy is not the sign of a hidebound mind that resists change and innovation. Hierarchy is not proof that you're a square and sell-out. Properly enacted, and thoughtfully maintained, hierarchy is the flak jacket that allows each member of your staff to reach their highest potential without being shredded by gunfire.

THE TENTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
DELIVER GOOD AND BAD NEWS EARLY AND OFTEN

Though I have beat to the ground the analogy of television show as startup corporation, the time has come for me to admit that - being as it may - a television show is also something of a wandering circus, with tents, and instruments, and artisans, and sideshows... and all the dramas that come along when your force a hundred or more people into close communion under the pressure cooker that is intense work performed under great stress for a defined period of time.

Invariably, drama comes from secrets. In my experience, secrets are poison - especially when you are exposed as their bearer. Sunlight is the best disinfectant.

The Tenth Law of showrunning is a close dependent of the Second: as the sun source of the show's vision and the one best qualified to say What It Is and What It Is not, make the ripping of Band-Aids your business, rumor control your secondary vocation, and complete transparency your ultimate goal...

And save the drama for the screen.

The reasons for this are of the essence of the First and Second Laws. You want and need to be the source of all that is true about your show - even if that truth is unpleasant. The worst position for a leader is as the bearer of bad news everyone already knows.

Any information that aids the speed and efficiency of creation - even if it hurts feelings - is worth exposing early, tactfully, and often... and if that information exposes you as the cause of a blunder, you are better off putting your pride aside and owning up than expecting everyone who works for you become the unwilling accomplices in - and hostages of - the protection of your own delicate sensibilities.

Whenever a rumor, a lie, or a truth that you have not sanctioned takes on a life of its own, it undermines your own ability to set the tone, define the parameters, and describe a path to success.

One of the more famous Hollywood memoirs is titled "Which Lie Did I Tell?" (Although my personal favorite title of a Hollywood memoir is "What Just Happened?")

Anyway, the title connotes a certain lack of remorse; the idea that part of the swingin' fun of makin' movies is a certain commitment to juggling deceptions until the final product is done and the chips fall where they may. The problem is that, where movies are, in contrast, fly-by-night operations, success in television means a long haul in close quarters: most lies, and their tellers, lack the stamina to survive for long.

To me transparency is not just a moral imperative to the life of a showrunner; it's a necessary lifeline. If you need to devote one iota of your energy to deception tracking and maintenance, that's an iota that's not going to the work you need to accomplish in the writers room. Hell, that energy would be better spent doing any one of the sexy glamorous jobs.

Transparency streamlines your life. Being transparent before anyone can be transparent for you means you control the narrative. Giving bad news before they crash land means no one can claim surprise at a bad break: the best thing a showrunner can say in the face of a difficult situation - especially where networks and studios, whose institutional memory is that of a goldfish and whose capacity to accept the blame for anything is nil - is "You can't say I didn't tell you this was coming."

Well, that, and "Here's the solution, you don't have to worry, I got this."

When everyone knows the truth, no one can be surprised by its arrival - and when it comes from you, no one can say that you lost control. And we all know that if there's something that showrunners love, it's control... sweet, sweet, control.

Well, control and one other thing... the last thing you have to sacrifice if you actually want to be good at this job. Are you ready, Sparky? This one's gonna hurt in the short term, but in the long term, it's the one that's going to make you look most like a prince...

THE ELEVENTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
SHARE CREDIT FOR SUCCESS TO A FAULT

The Eleventh and final Law of showrunning is the tail of the snake in the mouth of the First...

Never miss an opportunity to point out how another person's work has made you look good. It's your name on the show and it's all about you anyway, so you lose nothing by sharing credit.

I know that it sounds counter-intuitive. I know you feel embattled, and suspect that everyone is out to get you - even your own writers, whom you secretly believe write poorly on purpose just to spite, frazzle, and drive you to an early grave - and that everyone wants you to fail and prove your daddy right... so you must fight to be recognized as the creative genius behind every success.

I get it... but I have been through to the other side and have come back to tell you - and I know this one's a difficult one to swallow - you don't.

And you know why? That recognition comes to you weekly in the form of the largest paycheck on the payroll, the biggest office in the suite, the parking spot closest to the front door, and the Executive Producer credit in the main titles of every episode of the show - along with your production company card after the end titles.

Everyone knows who and what you are. Everyone is hanging on your words. You have no need to hoard what belongs to others in the name of gaining recognition for your struggles, however arduous and hard-fought they may seem.

In my twenty years, I have, regrettably, but not at all surprisingly, witnessed literally dozens, if not hundreds, of interactions between showrunners and network or studio executives in which the showrunner has - either purposefully or, even worse, casually and without concern or understanding of the ramifications - said something like: "If the last draft [NAME OF WRITER] handed to me is any indication, you won't be seeing that script for a while" or "The truth is, I had to rewrite every page [NAME OF WRITER] ever gave me" or the hardy perennial "I have to rewrite ALL the scripts from page one" or "[NAME OF WRITER]

really boned me with that draft," or the jolly old chestnut: "If only I could find a staff of writers that could just do my show."

For this type of showrunner, even praise comes from the left hand with a price in flesh and blood. I'm reminded of the fucking douchebag (yes, another person whose work I guarantee you respect and admire) who once said to me - at a cocktail party and within earshot of several members of his writing staff - "Well, I got the first round of scripts and the good news is at least I don't have to fire anyone... yet" (cue "charming" devilish grin).

Two things happen when you make comments like this in any context other than the actual moment at the actual end of the actual season when you actually have to take stock and make the actual decision to actually fire a staff member...

One: Your venting of your temporary frustration with a bad draft or an incompatible hiring choice to the Powers That Be at the studio and network colors their perception of that writer for FAR longer than you can possibly know. That's right, Sparky, you may have just shanked someone's career to make yourself feel better.

Two: You come across as a whiny fucking anhedonic little shit who has no concept of how good they have it.

You know all those network executives who listen to your troubles and trials, and sound - on the phone, and over countless sushi lunches - like they feel your pain?

They don't.

The network and studio are more invested in the success and longevity of the show than they are in the success and longevity of you. It's a distinction with a subtle, but massive difference.

Need an example? *The West Wing* outlasted Aaron Sorkin for three seasons. An extreme example, to be sure, but the studio made damned sure the show made it to syndication, turned a profit, and kept its place in all those "top twenty/thirty/forty/fifty series of all time" lists with or without him. Though the show was definitely seen as lacking the spark that made Sorkin's seasons a cultural event - John Wells's stewardship of the studio's precious resource produced a very respectable and stable series whose merits remained defendable to the very last day.

Also - and it gives me no pleasure to report this, Sparky - studio and network are certainly not invested in furthering your self-concept as a put-upon genius suffering a confederacy of dunces hellbent on holding back your brave attempts at self expression.

It sounds mean and mercenary, but it's called "show business," not "show friends" - and when they hear you throwing other writers under the bus, their words to you may be sympathetic, but what they are thinking isn't "Oh, poor, sweet, hard-working Sparky," but rather, "Sparky seems to have a very hard time making good hiring decisions and his inability to put together a functioning staff may become a liability, let's file that away for his next contract negotiation."

So there you go: two good reasons not to be the kind of showrunner who doesn't liberally share credit for success with his or her staff. One, it makes you sound like a fucking douchebag. Two, it makes you sound like an INCOMPETENT fucking douchebag.

The wonderful thing about credit is that it's not a finite resource. Now, I know that, somewhere along the line, someone made you believe that the credit dinosaurs were crushed under the Earth's crust a billion years ago, and it's all running out, and you have to hoard the stuff like you're fuckin' Smeagol.

Maybe it was your daddy who told you this instead of letting you know that he loved you, and so you feel like you must now follow his lead just in case it really is running out. But it's just not true. And, in all honesty, now that we are really getting to know one another, I'm really starting to think that your daddy is just not a good source for truth.

The truth is this: the more credit you give, the more credit you get - for being a genius and hiring a great staff, for being a good boss and a nice person (finally!) who can acknowledge the contributions of others, for fostering a positive work environment, and - most crucially - for being the kind of showrunner who protects their writers from the kinds of short term judgments that you have the liberty rethink in the long term.

And yet there will be times when the studio or network will ask for a draft that you are not prepared to hand over because you

need to do a lot of work on it because the writers didn't nail it, you know what you say?

You say: "There's still work to be done." That's it. You won't sound incompetent, You won't sound like a fucking douchebag. If there is pushback from the studio or network, take the responsibility yourself: own it and revel in the truth that you are SO big, and powerful, and OZ-like, that a blow that would cripple the career of someone of lesser rank is but a ding on your door.

And it's one of those plastic minivan doors that bounces back after the shopping cart hits it, by the way... the ding vanishes - as if by magic - the moment you turn in the script and it's great.

The reason this is the final Law of Showrunning is not just that it feeds right back into the First Law, but also that it is the biggest test of character before you as someone who has just been handed something close to absolute power in the business.

How you deal with praise, and success, and all the concomitant slings and arrows thrown at you for your position - and whether you recognize that you have within it the strength to be that aforementioned flak jacket to your staff - is as true a test of your self-esteem and worth as a person as anything you will ever face. As a senior manager you have the ability to either make your show and bring up with you an entire class of people who will credit you for their learning and empowerment... or to make your show with a huge amount of staff turnover, a reputation for being difficult, and a great deal of overwork heaped upon you by your own inability to earn your staff's loyalty.

Again, because I feel very strongly about this, I am going to go ahead and hit below the belt once more... forgive me, Sparky, but here it goes...

You don't earn daddy's love by hoarding all the good stuff and claiming it as your entitlement. You defeat daddy - and shame him into respect and admiration - by raising an entire generation of daughters and sons who don't perpetuate his legacy of abuse and abandonment. You make daddy look at you and see something he never made, and, in that way, you make him finally understand his own loss.

And then you forgive him.

(And let me make one thing clear about "daddy." I know the love of an effusive, demonstrative, and generous father - one whose accomplishments in his own field will forever dwarf the ones I have in mine, but never made our lives a competition in any way - as well as a kind hearted, giving, and supportive mother... and I still have bad mentors, bosses, and colleagues, male and female, who have made me feel robbed, worthless, and abused. So, if you were about to say "None of this applies to me because I like my father," go ahead and choke on that. Everyone has some figure like this in their life - and, unless you make peace with them, their influence as a motivator diminishes far more rapidly than does their effect in making you the same as them to others.)

Now we come to the part where you say something like: "But what about the undeniable truth that I can only do my best work between the hours of three and five in the morning while the prettiest assistant in the bullpen sits on the couch listening to me talk out my ideas?" (true story, for at least three different series I'm aware of)...

Or "But if I can't see every possible version of every possible scene in the edit bay, I will never be able to live with myself knowing that the final product could have been something better than what it is," (paraphrase of an actual quote)...

Or "The writers room is all fine and dandy, but the only time I can really relax is when the writers come to my house on the weekend, where I can smoke up and really let the creative juices flow away from the hustle-and-bustle and distractions," (yup, that happened)...

Or "How can I possibly reset my creative energies unless EVERYONE participates in the mandatory all-office 10PM pinball elimination tournament?" (You hear this story around town a lot, I'm not sure who the culprit is... and sometimes it's foosball instead of pinball)

Or "All those <u>other</u> shows may have writing styles that can be taught, but mine is so unique and and different that only I can render it in a way that satisfies my inner metronome," (Not a direct quote, but expressed by multiple showrunners - oftentimes as a badge of pride in interviews)...

Or "All this talk of management, and strategy, and humility is fine and dandy for ordinary hacks who are willing to settle for

less, but I'm a demanding perfectionist!" (True in spirit for the majority)

Or just plain "What about my 'creative process'?"

Well, shit, Sparky... I thought we could be friends... but since the last eighty-thousand words have obviously failed to get my point through to you, I'm gonna have to Call Down The Thunder.

Shut the fuck up about your creative process. That's what about your creative process.

Your "creative process" is what you did in the dark with your Speed Racer jammies around your ankles while mommy and daddy slept in the next room. Your "creative process" is the fiction you peddle to magazines when you're successful. Your "creative process" is the way you punish yourself and others for the unpardonable sin of being good at a job daddy didn't approve of but secretly wanted for himself.

Between just the two of us here in our grown-up dungarees, we both know damn well that there isn't a single writer who works for money who - when the time comes - can't just sit the fuck down and bang it the fuck out.

Now, guess what? Every single day of your life while your show is on the air is that time.

The price that you pay to play on the word stage and sermonize to an audience of millions is that you have to make concessions between the tempestuous *artiste* you idealized for yourself when you thought working in TV was the equivalent of being put on the train to Hogwarts and the reality that you are now a grown-ass adult professional who earns more for producing a single episode of television than most people do in a year. The price of admission to the Majors is that you now have people who depend on you - not just for their living, but also their physical, creative, and emotional well-being - and, oh yes, an audience that's waiting to be entertained.

Your creativity is there - it was always there - and it will always be there. Your creativity is a renewable resource - just like praise, and credit, and the simple, difficult truth that your daddy's neglect wasn't really your fault.

No, really. It was probably the result of his own abuse at the hands of your grandfather and had nothing to do with you as a person.

Your creativity is fed by everything around you - especially the great people you hired to facilitate this difficult undertaking - and is not some finite thing that must be hoarded and protected with arcane devices and traps. Whether you do or do not choose to embrace this truth, you owe it to the people who have signed up to work for you to not visit upon them the traumas of your past because that is the only way you think you can perform on the page.

Facing this may be the hardest and most painful truth for any writer. We cling to our delusions, depressions, and darknesses. We mistakenly believe that our creativity is a karmic recompense for the torturous havoc our inner gloom wreaks upon us and must therefore preserve that gloom at all costs. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth: while one certainly informs the other, your darkness and your writing come from different places... losing one will not affect the other.

And, if you don't have the time or energy to lay down your affectations once and for all, you can at least cultivate the requisite human decency to shield others from your insanity by building a scaffold of professionalism around yourself. Suffer for your art if you must, but make the effort to prevent others from becoming participants in your daily reenactment of your trauma. If you make a habit of practicing any number of these Laws, even in the most desultory manner, I promise that it will make your life, and your relationships - both in and out of the job - at least a little bit better.

Of course, you don't have to take my word for this.

The final, flithiest little secret of this essay is that you don't actually have to take my word for anything. That's right, Sparky - in case you didn't notice the *leitmotif* running through the massive spew of verbiage you have so courageously navigated, let me lay it out in pornographic detail...

Every horror story I have told... every tale of madness, rage, and abuse... every last little malfeasant example of selfish and wrongheaded management... was perpetrated by a showrunner "whose work I guarantee you respect and admire."

So there you go. The path is clear for you to be the monster you always knew you could be. Your success - as weighed by critical praise, awards wins, and financial recompense - will have little to do with whether you follow these Eleven Laws.

These may, in fact, be the only Laws you ever see that are not only completely optional, but - in all honesty - tangential to the most commonly accepted definition of success in your chosen field.

So I will just leave them here - as they say in the business of show - "For Your Consideration."

What happens next is up to you.

Me? I'm going to go check my email to see how many of my former bosses have written me angry missives demanding to know why I would nickname them "Sparky."

Notes. There's just no getting away from them.