

# **Tough Cookies Don't Crumble**

**Turn Set-Backs into Success**



**Susan O'Malley, MD**



**INDIE BOOKS  
INTERNATIONAL**

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*To my courageous mother whose perseverance  
gave me my first smile  
and  
my beautiful husband whose love makes me  
smile every day.*



*Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger  
men. Do not pray for tasks equal to your  
powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks.  
Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle,  
but you shall be the miracle.*

— **Phillips Brooks**



# Table of Contents

<b>Preface</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>Chapter 1:</b> What Do You Want?	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2:</b> Find Your Reason	<b>13</b>
<b>Chapter 3:</b> Row Your Own Boat, Baby	<b>27</b>
<b>Chapter 4:</b> Flip Your Switch	<b>41</b>
<b>Chapter 5:</b> Don't Marry Your Destiny	<b>53</b>
<b>Chapter 6:</b> Put On a Helmet	<b>69</b>
<b>Chapter 7:</b> Embrace Embarrassment	<b>83</b>
<b>Chapter 8:</b> Ask for Help	<b>95</b>
<b>Chapter 9:</b> Figure Out the Rules	<b>107</b>
<b>Chapter 10:</b> Make a Friend of Fear	<b>125</b>
<b>Chapter 11:</b> Be Willing to Make Mistakes	<b>139</b>
<b>Chapter 12:</b> Be Your Own Champion	<b>151</b>
<b>Chapter 13:</b> Never Surrender	<b>163</b>
<b>Epilogue</b>	<b>177</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>179</b>
<b>How to Get in Touch</b>	<b>185</b>



# Preface

**W**e keep secrets. We all do. Things about ourselves we don't tell everyone. Things we only tell a privileged few, or maybe no one at all. And we're entitled—after all everyone does not need to know everything about you. Except if you're writing a book outlining how you got from there to here. Then, I don't think it's fair to keep secrets.

It was important to me to lay it all out for you—all the ugliness, the failures, the embarrassment, the mistakes. It was important because, having read books and attended seminars by successful women, I have been on the receiving end of confusion more than once in my life. All it does is make you feel bad about yourself and maybe make you feel like a failure. *Why can't I do it? She did it.* And then you realize, *I don't have the whole story.*

If you were having an intimate conversation with your best friend, you would tell the whole story. Here is mine. Here are the steps I used to take control of my life and make my wildest dreams come true. Here are the challenges from my own journey, as well as others I met along the way. Here are the lessons I learned.

I could have left many stories out of this book—stories showing how scared I was, how vulnerable I felt, how I wanted to give up. But then, big chunks would be missing and you wouldn't have the whole story.

Achieving success, however you define it, is hard. But it can be a lot of fun—especially when you laugh at yourself. It turns out you have to walk a rocky road to get to easy street. Here's to your journey.

Dr. Susan O'Malley  
*January 2015*

# CHAPTER 1

## What Do You Want?

*Pour yourself a drink, put on some lipstick, and pull yourself together.*

—Elizabeth Taylor

**W**hat do you want? It took me many years to decide what I wanted. You must want something because you're about to start reading a book that outlines strategies to help you get the most out of your life. Maybe you were intrigued by the title, maybe you stumbled across this book in the self-improvement section of the store, or maybe someone gave it to you as a gift. However you came to hold this book in your hands, you know you're not settling into a hot steamy novel. So you must want something. We all do.

Do you want to start a business? Would you like to take your business to the next level? Perhaps you would like to attract more clients or add more programs? Are you looking for a better job or a promotion? Would you like to be a better leader in your organization? Are you struggling with work/life balance challenges? Trying to pass a licensing exam? How about just hoping for a better relationship with your family and friends? Would you like to take control of your life? I can tell you this—if you can define what you want, you have a better chance of getting it.

I couldn't define what I wanted until I was thirty years old. Even then, the definition kept changing. After years of floundering, I finally got my act together and decided I wanted to be a doctor. Years later, my dream expanded and I set my sights on being an entrepreneur, a public speaker, and an author. After many failed relationships, I decided that I deserved the best relationship I could have with a true soul mate or no relationship at all. Today I have all that and more. It didn't come easy and it didn't come cheap—but it came.

## **My Uphill Years**

Let me take you back to the early eighties. I was a college dropout and had been working as a secretary in New York City for more than ten years when, at age thirty, I decided to be a doctor. Can you imagine the rolled eyes and elbow jabs when I made that announcement? The good thing about rolled eyes and elbow jabs is that they usually occur behind your back. Which is much less intimidating than to your face.

The journey was never easy. I returned to college, graduated, and then went through the medical school application process. Twice. The first time around, I was rejected from every medical school in the country—at the time, forty-two. The following year I was accepted to the Mount Sinai School of Medicine (renamed in 2012, the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai) in New York City three weeks before school started.

I was thirty-five years old and six months pregnant without a husband. My life was in such turmoil that I needed

welfare assistance to afford to birth my baby. Not exactly the walking-talking example of the traditional medical student. Everything I wanted most in my life came about at the same time. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I wasn't willing to give anything up. I delivered my beautiful son Ryan two days before the start of Christmas vacation and stepped back in line with my classmates at the beginning of January 1987. And the race really began.

I chose a career as an emergency room doctor so I could juggle the demands of medicine and single motherhood. There was something about having my emergency room schedule secured to the refrigerator door with brightly colored alphabet magnets that kept me grounded. I trained in New York, on Long Island and in the Bronx, and worked in two emergency rooms in Connecticut after my training.

At age fifty, I left mainstream medicine with a dream and not much else and opened a medical spa dedicated to helping women navigate the aging process without surgery. I spent seventy-five dollars to place a newspaper ad and sat at the reception desk waiting for the phone to ring. Initially, my interest in aging was to keep myself out of the plastic surgeon's office but over the years I have come to realize this is my calling in a way the emergency room could never have been.

And now at age sixty-three, I have refocused my life to include author and public speaker, proving it's never too late to have a dream and to make that dream come true.

## The Back Story

Before we go any further, you should know a little more about me. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, to young parents who were totally unprepared for the experience. When my mother went into labor, they took the bus at midnight in a snowstorm to get to the hospital. It was February 1952. The day I arrived on the scene, my father's weekly paycheck was thirty-three dollars and my mother was unemployed. I'm told we took a taxi home. Let's just say, childbirth is a totally different experience today.

Over the years, our family grew to five children and we settled in Queens, New York. If you've ever been to Queens you know the houses are small and very close to each other. Seven of us lived in a twelve hundred square-foot house and crowded around a dinner table every night that was built for six.

This was a time when children shared bedrooms, everyone used the same bathroom, the phone was attached to the kitchen wall, and you had to negotiate with six other people to watch *your show* on the living room television. Not exactly lifestyles of the rich and famous.

My father was a maintenance worker for the New York Racing Association. He didn't have a college education, but he could fix things. He was meticulous in his work. He knew how to paint and how to plant flowers. He wore a green laborer's uniform with his name embroidered over the left breast and was part of the behind-the-scenes team that kept Belmont Race Track looking beautiful.

I learned a lot from my father. I learned the correct way to open a can of paint and how to store the brushes so they

could be used again. I learned how to hold a hammer and the correct way to hang pictures on a wall. In the last year of his life without saying a word he taught me the greatest lessons—the true meanings of courage and optimism. Sadly, my father did not live to see me open my own business or write this book, but to this day I feel his presence.

My mother was at home with us during the day and supplemented our family income by working as a cocktail waitress at a bowling alley in the evenings. She, like most women of her generation, did not have a college education either. My mother was very creative and had dreams of being a fashion designer or an actress when she was a young woman. She was very talented and was able to teach herself how to do almost anything.

Over the years, my mother was the family hairdresser, the family decorator, and fashion coordinator. She made all of her own clothes and many outfits for my sisters and me. Her craftsmanship far surpassed what was found on the racks. After I was grown, my mother went to college and got a degree in drama. She finally was able to enjoy acting in some local plays and was an extra in many feature films. Although her scenes eventually wound up on the cutting room floor, her speaking part in *Baby It's You* earned her a Screen Actors Guild card.

I learned two important lessons from my mother that I carry to this day. The first is determination. The other is how to stretch a dollar. My husband appreciates this one.

## Twenty Seconds That Changed My Life

When I was a toddler, I took a tumble down a flight of hallway stairs in a walker and smashed my face on a steel radiator. The impact sliced my two front baby teeth in half, with half landing on the dirty hallway floor and the other half jammed into my gums. The fall, which only took seconds, changed the course of my life.

We were living in an apartment on the second floor of a two-story house. When the front door opened downstairs, a gush of air would travel up the stairs and push our apartment door open. One Saturday morning, my mother came home with bags of groceries and forgot to dead lock the apartment door. The rest is history.

As a mother myself, I can't imagine the chaos and terror of that moment as my twenty-two-year-old mother dropped groceries all over the kitchen floor and came flying down the stairs to pull her bruised, bloodied and screaming baby girl out of a mangled walker.

My battered and bloodied face eventually healed and in due course the remnants of my baby teeth made their way through my gums. But everyone held their breath to see how my permanent teeth would develop.

My adult two front teeth grew in prematurely when I was five years old. One was at a ninety-degree angle and the other at a forty-five-degree angle. They were brown, jagged and pock marked and resembled driftwood on the beach. It was a horrifying sight even for those who knew what had happened. My jumbled teeth were uncomfortable and cut up the inside of my mouth. I felt like a monster.

They affected the way I ate and the way I talked. They affected my self-esteem and my self-worth. I stopped smiling. We spent my entire childhood traveling from one dentist to another and they all had the same advice: “Pull them out and give her false teeth.” Can you imagine? There was no such thing as cosmetic dentistry in 1958.

It is a testament to my mother’s perseverance that I can smile today. She refused to accept that answer and didn’t stop until she found the dentist who could give us what we wanted and needed: a smile people could smile back at. Today I tap into that trauma whenever a woman seeks me out, believing she can’t be beautiful. It’s part of what has made me a trusted cosmetic doctor and a confidant to thousands of women.

## **Growing Up Without a Goal**

I was the only one of my neighborhood friends who went to college, but it didn’t last long. At eighteen years old, without any goal, direction, drive, or ambition, I dropped out of college after one year and became a secretary. Although that was my job for eleven years, my goal was to find a man to marry me. At the time, hitching my star to someone else’s wagon seemed like my best option. At age twenty-nine, after another failed relationship, it was finally time to take stock of my life.

I never excelled at anything. I didn’t sing, I didn’t dance, and I didn’t play sports. I just showed up. In 2009, I attended my fortieth high school reunion at The Mary Louis Academy (a Catholic college-preparatory school for young women). It was clear from that evening’s conversations with classmates

that there had been three tracks of study at the school. This came as a surprise to me since I had blocked out most of my high school experience. The first track was for overachievers, the second for good students with potential and the third—well, you know.

From the classes I recalled taking, it was clear I was in the lowest track. At the reunion, I was remembered as being pretty and funny, but no one offered up recollections of me as being smart. I was a “C” student in the lowest track—good grief!

## Making Choices

As you read this, ask yourself: “Am I living the life I chose, or did my life choose me?” When you wait for things to happen, life chooses you. I know this firsthand. For years I showed up physically and waited for life to get better. All through my twenties, I would look at friends who had a great life and think they were just lucky. I had a job and an apartment and occasionally a steady boyfriend, but I didn't have a great life.

It took me more years than I would like to admit to figure out why. I'm here to share my secrets, but before I do, I ask you to think about your own life. Do you have the life of your dreams? Do you have a great life? What's holding you back from having your best life, a fulfilling career or satisfying relationships? What stalled your dreams? What killed them? Put another way, what is the enemy of great?

The answer might surprise you. It has nothing to do with not having opportunities or lack of education or not enough money. The enemy of *great* is *good*. I'd love to tell you I came

up with this on my own, but I didn't. Jim Collins, business consultant and author of five books, among them *The New York Times* best seller, *Good to Great*, said it and inspirational speakers have been repeating it for years. I'm referencing Jim Collins because I finally got it, and I'm hoping you will too.

Do you have a good job? You know—the one that pays well but is so boring that you dread getting up every morning? Or even worse—the one that pays so well you can't leave because you'll never find another job to pay you as much as you're earning now? And, at this point, you have developed some pretty bad habits like paying the mortgage and buying food for the family.

If you can relate, you're not alone. A 2011 Gallup Poll reported that 71 percent of American workers are emotionally disconnected from their workplaces and are less likely to be productive. That means only one-third of Americans are enthusiastic about their work and making positive contributions.

I faced this dilemma when I walked away from my emergency room position. I was paid very well but after years of fulfillment, I just wasn't enjoying the work anymore. I was forty-nine years old, working around the clock and raising my son by telephone. It was exhausting and I found myself not wanting to show up for my shifts, especially overnight shifts.

Trust me, if you ever find yourself in the emergency room you want a doctor who would rather be working there than any other place on the planet. I knew it was time for me to go and I started exploring other options. I spent a year in an occupational health clinic treating work-related injuries. It was not fulfilling but at least I was not working around the clock.

After much soul-searching and conversations with family and friends, I decided to open a medical spa dedicated to helping women navigate the aging process without surgery. Can you imagine the looks of horror when I announced, at age fifty, I was leaving a steady six-figure income position in mainstream medicine to open a business I knew nothing about? And sit at the reception desk myself?

I've learned so many lessons over the years. Adversity can be a great teacher. It can teach you perseverance and courage; it can teach you to trust your instincts and push past your perceived limitations; but most of all, it can teach you how to forgive yourself and keep on going. So as you might have guessed, this is a book about lessons learned and the strategies used to make big dreams real—not only my dreams, but your dreams too.

As I reflect upon my humble start, I realized there were key strategies that helped me achieve my goals. To be clear, I didn't realize they were strategies at the time. I was just slogging through the mud of my life. I was just putting one foot in front of the other. But there was more than that. There was falling down and getting back up. There was figuring out what worked and what didn't. There was laughing and crying. There was fear and reward. There were mistakes and regrets.

You can call them lessons. You can call them strategies. You can call them whatever you like. They were a roadmap to get me to this place. If you need a roadmap, maybe they will help you too. Or maybe, you will recognize yourself and they will help you avoid slogging as hard or as far as I did.

I've accomplished a great deal and you can too. I've made a ton of mistakes and have overcome many obstacles. Many

times, I was my own obstacle. I can be my own obstacle to this day. I recognize it much quicker now, and if I don't, the supportive people in my circle remind me. These are the strategies that helped me climb out of many holes and stand on firm ground. I hope they help you too.

So here is my story, inspirational I'm told. I never considered myself an inspiration, just a hard worker. If it inspires you, that would make me happy. If it makes you work harder, that would make me happier. If it helps you recognize yourself and push past your perceived limitations to the greatness that is your story, that would be the most rewarding of all.