



On the Road from Dreams to Destiny

There's a Monster
in There!

Rickey Minor

Have you ever watched a horror movie and had to restrain yourself from shouting at the screen just as the hero was turning the doorknob? “Hey! Don’t open that door! There’s a monster in there!”

Reality, too, can be pretty scary, the current economic crisis notwithstanding. In each of our lives, there are dozens of monsters lurking in the shadows, ready to pounce on us at our jobs and inside our homes. But unlike the cinematic versions, these horrible creatures reside only in our minds.

These fiends do have names. The biggest one is called Ego, and he has many brothers and sisters, including Arrogance, Greed, Laziness and Jealousy among others. We permit them to devour our dreams, destroy the fruits of our talent, sap our productivity and feed on our joy.

In my new book, *There’s No Traffic on the Extra Mile: Lessons on the Road from Dreams to Destiny*, I share some fun stories with a serious purpose in mind. The road in the title has taken me from a childhood in the inner city and touring as a young musician, to becoming the music director for some of the top artists in the business and for the mega-hit show, *American Idol*. Although my job is to help make great music, I learned early on that success takes a lot more than talent and knowing how to hit the right note. The other half of the equation is the art of working well with people and getting out of your own way.

Some of the lessons embedded in the stories I tell may sound familiar—perhaps told to you by a grandmother, a teacher, a supervisor or a mentor. But given the challenges most of us are having in today’s society, age-old wisdom based on good common sense can’t be repeated enough. My grandmother, Donia Minor, packaged her advice with great sayings like “kindness will take you further than money.” Or “God don’t like ugly and he ain’t too crazy about pretty.” That was one she told me if she saw that I was getting a little too big for my britches.

Once we have made enough mistakes and have learned from some of them, we’re in a place to start giving advice. But too often, it falls on deaf ears. We think to ourselves, “This is so simple. Why isn’t this person listening? Why don’t they get it?”

I am using my stories to try to crack through the brick walls of denial many of us have built around ourselves, walls that keep us from listening to the advice we need to hear. Few of us like to be lectured or spoken down to by some know-it-all expert high up on a pedestal. On the contrary, I want anybody who hears my story to walk away and say, “That Rickey Minor is not all that extraordinary.” That leads to the next logical thought: “If a guy like Rickey Minor can make it and truly turn his dreams into his destiny, then what could possibly be standing in my way?”

When I was a student at UCLA, I saw a notice on a bulletin board that a noted jazz musician named Nat Adderley was going to give a lunchtime lecture at the student recreation center. Something told me that this was not to be missed. I immediately recognized the name; Nat was a famous horn player and the brother of the famous Cannonball Adderley, who had played on those legendary and revolutionary recordings with Miles Davis in the 1950s.

During the lecture, Nat played a short sample of a jazz piece and then asked the students in the audience for their opinion of it. One student got the courage up to say what the rest of us were thinking: it didn't sound like music; more like somebody banging on pots and pans.

Not everything we hear will be our favorite music, but if we would just *try* to understand it, our appreciation would go up.

In playing that record, Nat had set me up for a big lesson. He told a not-so-flattering story about himself as a way to bring his point home. He told us how his brother, Cannonball, had invited him to go see a new and exciting jazz performer play at a club, a guy named Charley Parker. "They call him 'The Bird,'" Cannonball had said to him. Long story short, Nat didn't like what he heard and left in the middle of the show. When Cannonball found out, he didn't mince words with his brother. "You're ignorant," he told him. "You don't like it because you don't understand it." So Nat went on to tell us that not everything we hear will be our favorite music, but if we would just *try* to understand it, our appreciation would go up. If we would learn to recognize what went into it—the artistry and the talent and all the various nuances—we might just learn something new.

When I went home that afternoon, it hit me. On the refrigerator, covered in dust, was a record album my music teacher had given to me six months earlier. I had listened to it once and disliked it so much that I banished it to a place out of sight where I could quite easily forget about it. But after hearing that lecture, I went and dusted off that album and put in on the turntable.

That record ended up having a major impact on my development as an artist. Today, I can still sing every single part of the arrangements on Charley Mingus's "Mingus, Mingus, Mingus" album. It also brought with it another message. Not only did I not know enough to appreciate the record when I first listened to it months before, I wasn't ready for the opportunity. It made me consequently ask myself, "What do I need to do to be ready?" It is a question that we need to frequently pose again and again whenever an opportunity to learn and grow presents itself. We need to maintain the willingness to stick our necks out and try something new. Letting that album collect dust, I admit, was an old pattern that was holding me back, letting things stay in the lull of the false security of the status quo.

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The purpose of this anecdote is to remind us to always stay open to inspiration because it is all around us, and many times in places where we least expect it. Whether you are in a rock 'n roll band or a corporation with a thousand employees, whether you're new and green and just starting out or high up and on top of your game, certain tipping points can lead us forward on the road of promise or right to the nearest exit of disappointment and misfortune.

We need to call attention to all the ways we can take control of our destiny, with special emphasis on becoming aware of our actions in situations that we commonly confront in our everyday lives. We face constant choices. Our decisions can move us forward towards our goals or shift us into reverse. So many of our negative choices and behaviors start in a mindless and almost automatic fashion. The trick is to create a strategy for taking positive action and eliminating the harmful patterns we commonly fall into that are preventable if we're tuned in.

My message is simple: **Think before you open that door where those monsters may be hanging out.** Be aware. And be prepared. Something remarkable starts to happen once we decide that these monsters are no longer welcome in our lives. Sometimes, the changes are so subtle that hardly anyone will notice. Wondrous things can come from the slightest attitude shift. Other times, the leaps forward you might experience are so magical that they're almost impossible to disguise.

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The other stories and anecdotes in my book deal with some other situations that can become quagmires if unaddressed. Here are just a few examples:

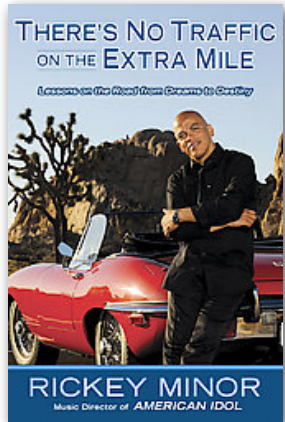
- » Foolproof strategies on the fine art of screwing up; a must-read primer on damage control following a mistake.
- » Learning how to not be afraid to say “no.” This is based on the time early in my career when I almost got fired from four jobs in one day
- » Getting the Ego under control and learning how not to take things so personally
- » How to turn difficult people you’re working with into polite pussycats.
- » Don’t think that you can coast once you get to the top of your profession. I practice more fastidiously and triple-check my work more carefully than I did ten years ago. There’s someone ready to take your place if the high quality and attention to detail clients have come to expect (and that got you there) start to falter.
- » What happens if your success stops? It’s probably not a case of the product being bad. Times change, and they’re not buying what you’re selling. We discuss when you know it’s time to get off the train, and how to jump on a new one.

Whether you watch *American Idol* or not, I trust you’ll find the information fascinating and enlightening. In sixteen short weeks, the young performers compress at warp speed a career arc that might otherwise have taken sixteen years. So many of the attributes for success and the unleashed monsters I speak about are on full display in a dramatic exercise of cause and effect. With thirty million people watching, there is no place to run and hide.

I have learned through my life that it's great to have dreams, but they have to be realistic. And we need to have a plan to achieve them. There are certainly untold millions who sing in the shower and picture themselves winning American Idol. But, the truth of the matter is that I won't be able to shoot a basket like Michael Jordan no matter how much I dream or how hard I try. However, we each have a form of genius inside. Once we identify and nurture our god-given talents, our lofty goals become much more tangible and attainable. It's not only about working hard and having strong self-discipline and tenacity. What we need to expose are our internal deal-breakers, the things that so easily slip under the radar, that may not seem to be important at the time or that we choose to simply deny or forget.

My book, *There's No Traffic on the Extra Mile*, took about fifteen months to write, from concept to finished product. In that time, conditions in America changed dramatically. While people can agonize over declining numbers in the economy, many also feel that we've lost the thread of that spirit of innovation and creativity. I hope that *There's No Traffic on the Extra Mile* will be embraced as a small, yet highly effective tool to help us find again what has been temporarily misplaced. 📖

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[*There's No Traffic on the Extra Mile.*](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rickey Minor is the music director of American Idol and has served as music director for nearly every major American awards show including the Grammys, the Emmys, and the Super Bowl. He has worked with major recording artists including Whitney Houston, Christina Aguilera, Alicia Keys, Ray Charles, Beyoncé Knowles, and many more. He lives in Los Angeles.

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