

Competition, coattails, and colleagues

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

May 24, 2015

I was talking about an author I admire and Brian, my husband, asked, “Her writing’s great and all, but who’s she bringing up?”

I knew what he meant. He wanted to know who was riding her coattails. Who were the people she was encouraging to write and helping along the process? I named a couple of people, and he nodded with satisfaction.

Writing seems like a solitary pursuit. We hear stories about authors going into a cabin for months of quiet labor among the smell of fir trees. I’m not sure if things have changed, because I have always been a writer on the heel of things. (In other words people in publishing often point to 2008 as a time when everything shifted, and my first book came out at the end of 2007.) But I do know that it’s a collegial pursuit now. I have not always managed things well, but here are some things I’ve learned.

**Focus your competitive spirit wisely.** I’m a competitive person by nature. I tried to pretend that I wasn’t, because being competitive just doesn’t feel like a trait that a spiritual, wise person should have. But sadly, it’s true in my case.

So, I’ve embraced my competitive nature and realized that drive is helpful when it comes to writing. There are not a lot of motivators when writing a proposal, submitting articles, or posting a blog. There’s very little money when starting out. So competition is helpful, but a person has to be wise about selecting a competitor.

I don’t compete against women or people of color. There are many worthy competitors in these categories, but they have a hundred layers of muck that they have to sort through in this business, so they get all my support.

I don’t think that competition has to be negative. In fact, choosing a competitor should be a secret honor. But it’s easy for that competitive spirit to turn into toxic jealousy or nasty schadenfreude. When people have been historically been ignored

in a particular field (like religion), then underrepresented communities don't need to focus any negativity on one another.

Usually, I choose someone who is doing better than I am professionally, is a little older than me, is extremely talented, and gets on my nerves. I don't write who it is. I don't write nasty reviews about them. I don't slam them in public. I just compare Amazon rankings and take note of ridiculous, small things that inexplicably motivate me to get my manuscript done.

**Do not get on the seesaw.** What is the seesaw? I think [Eboo Patel](#) first introduced me to the seesaw, when he was describing Muslim/Christian relations. He talked about how Muslim extremists fuel Christian extremists. Christian extremists fuel Muslim extremists. They feed off one another, using the other's hatred in order to propel their own careers. No one wins that game of seesaw. It just ignites religious violence in the world.

We see people getting on the seesaw all the time in our clickbait culture. It seems to work best with social media. A person writes nasty, sexist things, so another blogger calls them out. Am I saying this is always wrong? Of course not. We all need to be held accountable. But when we, as writers *only* produce content that puts down particular people, then remember we are sitting on a seesaw. We will go down eventually, and we will find ourselves being attacked with the same vitriol we heaped on others.

**Bring others up.** It's important to always look behind us, taking careful note of who follows us. I'm thinking of [Phyllis Tickle](#) now. I just found out that she was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer and it has already spread to her spine.

Phyllis is always looking behind her, taking note of her coattails and bringing people up. She endorses books when she has so many things demanding her time. She lectured me, as a young author, for blogging too much and wasting my creative energy (she was right). Hundreds of writers have been brought up by her wisdom and extraordinary ability to network.

I don't want to claim a special relationship with Phyllis, but I do want to honor the amazing woman she is. And the beautiful thing about Phyllis? The thing I learned the most from her? She not only brings people up, but she knows how to lean on others as well. She moves through this world with such grace, because she has a thousand people on her coattails, holding her up in prayer, love, and light.

Writing is not a solitary pursuit. And I'm so honored to have beautiful colleagues, like Phyllis, surrounding me, before and behind me. Through them, I learn to be a better artist and a better human.