

*The Atalanta Syndrome™*  
Who is Atalanta? You, that's Who!

Nancy C. Lewine, PhD  
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Atalanta (at-uh-LAN-tuh)

Abandoned at birth by a father who wanted a son, Atalanta became a great heroine and one of the Argonauts. Unwilling to marry, she finally consented to wed any man who could beat her at a foot race. Such was her fleetness that she would have remained happily single, but that the Goddess of Love gave one of her suitors golden apples to scatter on the race course. These were magical, and Atalanta could not resist them. Stooping to gather them in, she lost the contest to her destined husband.

Encyclopedia of Greek Mythology,  
[www.mythweb.com](http://www.mythweb.com)

Remember Atalanta? She sabotaged her own chances of winning the race under the spell of Venus' apples. Are you Atalanta, irresistibly picking up those apples on your life path which only serves to slow you down? If so, you are your own enemy, as marsupial comic strip star Pogo proclaims, "We have met the enemy, and he is us!"

Have you ever sabotaged your own success? Many of you may adamantly respond, "NO!" You have worked hard, put in long hours, gone for the gold, and persevered through the stress, right? You have done all you could do. Me, too! *And*, I have also committed self-sabotage. Surprised?

No matter how hard I have worked or how long my list of accomplishments, when I delved deeper into myself, at times I found that I held something back. I certainly did not do it consciously or intentionally! Yet, upon reflection, there it was staring at me in the mirror: an act of self-sabotage! I could have done a better job. I could have stretched myself there. I could have let go of one or two of those golden apples I picked up along the way.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not talking about "woulda, coulda, shoulda." I'm not talking about the infamous guilt trip. It's more subtle than that. In fact, it's an invisible barrier that was drawn around me sometime in my past without my knowledge or permission.

You may say, "so what? Look at what you HAVE done! You have made it. You are old enough to accept the choices you made and the way life influenced you, just like the rest of us!" True. BUT, what about all those people who could have benefitted from my reined in talent? How would *their* lives have been better as a result of me sharing my higher talents and potential with the world? I try to be unselfish and think about them. I think about my son. How can I counteract our socialization process and support his expression of his own unique talents? I want to refrain and contain any of my own contribution to the stunting of his *potential*.

For example, our society, while having made great strides in women's rights, still tries to peg girls into feminine roles and boys into masculine ones (by whose definition?). When my son was about five years old, he commented that "construction workers were boys." I was shocked. I know he was not taught that at home. Where did he get that notion? We all know where - society at large. I couldn't change the system, but I could help him broaden his outlook. Every time I saw a female construction worker on the road, I pointed it out to him until he got sick of it. He learned for himself that stereotype was not true. Were there mostly men? Yes. But, the point was made that women can be, and ARE, construction workers, too. It's not black and white based on gender.

Why bring this up? Think about your own personal experience. What messages did you receive in your childhood and teenage years that inculcated you with the idea that you had to hold back in some areas? Maybe you were a male who liked the natural beauty of dancing, like in the

movie, *Billy Elliott*. Chances are not only your father, but also your mother, whisked you off to football, soccer or karate to bring out your masculine side! These are dramatic examples of intentional sabotage. For me, the subtle ones were more difficult to identify.

Were you called “dumb bunny,” or told you could not go to veterinary school because you had to be a “real” doctor and attend medical school? Are you harboring a God-given talent with animals, but spend every waking moment with people? What about those disapproving looks and wholesale lack of support when you were excited about scoring points in a volleyball match and wanted to go to college on a full scholarship?

“Don’t be better than average.” “Don’t do better than the boys.” “You’re not smart enough to be a doctor.” “Your brother works harder than you do.” “Don’t make a mistake.” “Don’t try that, you might fail.” “Don’t get too far ahead of the group.” All of these comments were sown deep into our psyche long before we are aware they have taken root. As kids, we probably balked the first times we heard those kinds of words. Over time, our resistance wore down and soon we succumbed. What does that have to do with your career now? *Everything!*

How Do I Know This?

I have extensively studied the formal scientific research about motivation and developing human potential. In nearly thirty years of working with hundreds of individuals and organizations helping them improve their performance, we uncovered a vast array of self-sabotaging obstacles and challenges hindering their accomplishments.

Were they failures or deeply depressed? No, I’m not a therapist. I don’t treat clinical issues. These individuals were just like you and me trying to succeed at life with the cards they have been dealt.

There is a solution. It's not a secret. We can discard some of our original cards and receive new ones. The power of the new ones is that we can CHOOSE them ourselves this time! So much of who we are is based on what we learned, how we were conditioned. What is learned can be unlearned. We can replace old, worn out, self-sabotaging thoughts and behaviors with new, healthier ones. It's work. It may be painful. It's your choice! The question remains, do you have a talent or something yet to accomplish that you've been keeping at bay? I have.

### *My self-sabotage*

People have called me many names, but I doubt "underachiever" is one of them! If I'm anything I am a compulsive overachiever. Yet, I have unintentionally and unconsciously committed self-sabotage in my life. I have held myself back. Many who know me might gasp at the notion! Buying my own house as a single 26 year old woman; making more money than my father or mother, actually both combined; playing and co-captaining a Top Twenty Women's Basketball college team(Penn State); receiving a contract to play women's professional basketball, earning a BS, MA, and PhD degrees, starting two businesses; having a successful consulting career (getting a job IN my major in 1980s); getting married and raising a child; earning seven years of medals in TKD National competitions; earning 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Black Belts in TKD - doesn't sound like underachieving or self-sabotaging, does it? By many standards, it's a lifetime of success packed into ½ a lifetime, yet the yardstick of measurement of my own excellence is MY OWN POTENTIAL. And, yes, I've thwarted attempts at going even further. No, it hasn't been intentional as a masochist, it's those "golden apples" I picked up on my own Atalanta Path of Life.

One of those "apples" was for me to slow down when I "ran too far" ahead of everyone

else around me. I'd start out learning and striving. I'd master the basics, performed well, racked up the achievements, and became a leader within my group of peers. I continued growing and developing my skills, only to notice some "friends" beginning to get jealous and begin to cut me down. Others would fade away. Some would try to keep up but could not. I was too far ahead by then and had outgrown them. I was alone and out in front. I kept looking back over my shoulder to see who might catch up. If I got too far ahead, I'd slow down waiting for someone else to catch up. I picked up a golden apple of self-sabotage.

I know I have more to give, learn and do, yet it gets lonely out front. In mundane competition I can only get or be better than my competitors, but that won't always tap into my potential for being great. Focusing on the goal ahead of me, my personal goal that is unique to me, effectively taps my potential. Once you've beaten your competition the ultimate challenge is your next level to reach. Your success is measured against your self and beating your personal best.

Often, it's a lonely road. You have to struggle with pushing your envelope without other people telling you where, what, and how far to go. You have to keep yourself focused. You rely on yourself to stay motivated during the struggles. You learn to reach out and ask for help because no one thinks you need it. They assume that you are so far ahead that you don't need any help. (Boy, are they WRONG!). When you strive in this new way you relinquish the Competitor role and transform into the Pioneer. You go where YOU haven't gone before, and sometimes where no one else has either!

### *Personal Case-In-Point*

In 2003, I wanted to test my skills and challenge myself to the next level of athletic achievement in Taekwondo Olympic-style sparring. I accomplished what no other woman (that I

could confirm) had done. After years of successfully competing in my Golden Seniors (I kid you not! That was the category) age bracket, as a 46 year old, I dropped down to the 18-32 year-old division. This is *the* elite group of women training at the highest levels of conditioning and skills. The winners qualify for our Olympic team. Did I have Olympic delusions of grandeur? NO. My stretch goal was to qualify at State's ( I did. I won GOLD!), go to Nationals. My goal at Nationals was making it through an entire match without collapsing or being knocked out! Not only did I do that, I went into the 3<sup>rd</sup> round TIED, with a chance to win. I didn't. My competitor was better trained and conditioned than I. She was 21 years *younger* and lost in her next match, to the eventual WINNER of our bracket! While the competitor in me mourned the loss, the pioneer cheered for the goal I had accomplished! I even beat my goal because I had not expected to be tied at the end of the second round. I had lots of people congratulating me through the rest of the tournament - as if I HAD won! Several other "Golden Seniors" told me I inspired them to do the same for themselves the next year.

The greatest compliment I received was from the referee in our ring. She chased me down right after the match and told me what a great match it was. That comment was curious itself because I made a major mistake that cost me the match. Then, I floored her when I told her I was 46! She had NO IDEA! Heck, I thought my head full of grey hair was a dead giveaway!

Today, five years later, I have a new set of goals with an accordingly long list of obstacles and challenges in my way. Some I bring to every major goal I've set, others are new and unique to the goal. . . here's a current list of mine:

Someone else already did it/wrote about it/market's crowded  
Distractions ("All distractions are sabotage." Caroline Myss)  
Other people

Need coffee/Hungry/Tired/Other activities  
Need to learn more, not good enough yet, no one to help/support me  
Too focused on obstacles, being relieved that there are some  
Mental chatter, I can't, I won't, Don't feel like it  
Someone rescue me!  
Email  
Past successes (resting on laurels), need competition or anger (external motivators)

### **What is in YOUR way of YOUR goals?**

Are people throwing “golden apples” in your way, preventing you from making more progress than *they* would approve of? They can make remarks that range from blatant criticism, “so, you think that will make you famous?” to more subtle forms of facial expressions or lack of responsive, interested attention in the form of passive resistance. There may be friends and family who say they support you, “go for it,” and all the other “right” things to say, but when you actually DO achieve something or make good progress, they metaphorically yawn “ho-hum” and change the subject. The path to your success is littered with these hidden land mines and “golden” apples. What about your own acts of self-sabotage?

#### *Acid Test of Achievement Self-Sabotage*

What is your #1 goal? You don't have one? ***Self-sabotage!*** You do have one? How much concentrated effort do you invest into implementing that goal on a consistent, daily basis? Four hours? One hour? Two minutes? Without the benefit of scientific scrutiny, let's apply Pareto's 80/20 rule. Are you spending at least 20% of your time each day on your Number One goal? No? Self-sabotage strikes again! I can almost see that golden apple sitting on top of your desk! If you have a goal, but spend little or no time on implementing it, then what you really have is a wish, not a goal. When you fail to act on your most precious dreams and desires you

join the ranks of Atalanta's Club.

Go ahead. Do your own research. Track your time for a week. It's a heinous task, but possibly one of the best medicines you can administer to your anemic activity. Track it in real time - the actual time you spend working, doing, taking action. If you get twelve interruptions, get coffee three times an hour, answer every e-mail that pops up, then you haven't actually worked for an hour. It may only be a total of 17 focused minutes. In the athletic world, we train athletes to FOCUS! It's one of the critical mental skills contributing to sport success. Think about it. The basketball players don't go to the court for two hours to talk, get coffee, answer the phone, and shuffle paper around the desk. They do their job, which is to play ball and win games. In business, we could use better concentration skills to help us focus on achieving our goals. In business, we need to honor the notion of practice. Caroline Myss boldly states that "all distractions are self-sabotage!" Think about it.

Now that you've taken the acid test, how did you do? Be honest if you came up short. No rationalizations, excuses, or blame. Are you screaming, "Help Me! What do I do about this?" If you still fervently desire that goal, then let's sharpen your mental skills and explore one key area where you throw obstacles in your own path. Once you identify them, you can begin to change or remove those obstacles, unlocking your potential flood gates one step at a time.

#### *Intrapersonal Skills - Self Talk*

The energetic landscape of your thoughts and attitudes exists solely within your control! That is GOOD NEWS! You have control over what you think about yourself and what you deserve. Many books have been written about developing positive thoughts so I won't go into detail about it. There are two kinds of self-talk. One is the current and active kind. The other is

deeper and more subtle, early childhood conditioned thoughts.

Take a few minutes and write down all the thoughts that are going through your head. Don't censor them. Write them as they appear. This is your self-talk. The ongoing chatter in your brain reacting to what you are currently doing. What are your thoughts right before an important presentation, performance review, or confrontation? Do you tell yourself good things or bad?

To surface the longer standing attitudes "taught" to you in your childhood, go back in time and recall what your parents, siblings, teachers, friends, coaches, clerics etc. said to you repeatedly. What encouraging statements did you receive? What discouraging comments were made? I'm not saying these comments were intended to harm you or hurt your feelings. They may have been negative, but for now let's take a neutral look at them. Were you called names? Or told "artists can't make a living" or "do you know how many kids make it to the pros?" Women, were you told, as I was, "don't be better than the boys?" I was an excellent athlete. If I was going on a date and we were going bowling, just before I walked out the door my mom would remind me, "remember, let the boy win." Was she trying to intentionally sabotage me? I don't think so. She wanted me to "win" the boy, not the game. She assumed the boys wouldn't like me if I scored higher than they did. Over time, my mother's thoughts sunk deep into my psyche and years later, through a lot of intrapersonal excavation, I realized I was "holding back" and letting the boys "win." Somehow *my* chance at glory was always de-prioritized. It was unconscious self-sabotage programmed in my childhood.

If you can identify one attitude, or habit of thought, underlying a key source of self-sabotage, you can take steps to replace it with a new, updated version. This new attitude will be

designed to support your achievements, not detract from them. One new attitude to consider is Dr. Lewine's trademark adage, "Finish What You Start. Celebrate What You Finish.™" In her next installment, she will address the transformation from dysfunctional self-sabotage to healthy self-motivation and self-empowerment.

If you find yourself a member of the Atalanta Club, and want to join the Finish What You Start. Celebrate What You Finish™ Alliance, you may contact Dr. Nancy Lewine, to find out the services and products available to support you on your journey to overcome self-sabotage. Nancy can be reached at [nclewine@nloinc.biz](mailto:nclewine@nloinc.biz). Her website is [www.nloinc.biz](http://www.nloinc.biz).