



RAY EDWARDS

LIVE WITH JOY. LEAD WITH PASSION. PROSPER WITH PURPOSE.

Frank Viola Interview Episode 171

Writers sure love to talk about writing, and we love talking to other writers. One of my favorite Christian authors of all time is actually a gentleman named Frank Viola and I've admired his work for some time. I love his book *God's Favorite Place on Earth*. I love *The Jesus Manifesto*. There are so many books he's written, 24 in fact.

It's such a privilege to have become friends with Frank and I was able to talk him into doing this rather lengthy interview talking about writing, how one becomes a writer, how one gets published and how he does what he does. We're going to split this. It's a two-part episode because the interview ended up being so long. We're just going to go straight into it. This is my conversation with Christian author Frank Viola. Let's get right to it.

Feature Presentation

Ray: Why do you write?

Frank: Well, I think for me, Ray, it's a dual motivation. One is I write to get out of what's in my own heart and be able to see it, be able to get it out of me, as it were. So I guess there's something inside of me wherein I'm writing for myself; there's a need there. The other reason why I write is because I want other people to be helped by those things that have helped me personally.

Everything I have written has come out of my own experience. Usually, it's a struggle. It's a problem that I've sought a solution for and so, consequently, I'm writing to help others with that which has helped me. I guess there's another thing involved, too, and that is I see a lot of what's out there now. I'm a Christian author so I'm writing to a Christian audience, but there's another motivation and I'll put it in the words of my good friend Leonard Sweet.

I asked him a question once, I said, when you're not motivated to write what gets you motivated and his answer was I read. Because when I read what's out there I get mad and then I write. In other words, it's a response to a lot of the things that are out there that are not so helpful that are on more of the shallow side, the superficial side and much that just perpetuates some of the problems that have been going on for a long time and so writing is a response to that with the hopes to help other people.

Ray: Okay. I want to ask you and I want to be respectful. I don't want to name anybody, we don't need to get into that, but what kinds of things do you see that are being written that are shallow that evoke that response in you?

Frank: Well, there's many, but I'll mention one. Right now there is a big push in evangelicalism on the subject of discipleship and making disciples and so we have many Christians, particularly those in their 20s, 30s and some in their 40s, who are all jazzed about making disciples. That's all fine and well, but so often when we look at what's being taught making disciples really comes down to leading somebody to Jesus and then

telling them to go make disciples without really stepping back and saying what on earth is a disciple in the first place.

One of the things that's missing, I call it the missing ingredient, is that in the New Testament the core of New Testament Revelation and the definition of a disciple is someone who is living by the indwelling life of Jesus Christ. That's what a disciple is, *Not I, but Christ who lives in me.*

If you ask the typical Christian who is all jazzed about making disciples and you say, what is a disciple, they'll give you answers like, well, it's a follower of Jesus. Okay. Well, what does that mean? What does that look like? Well, pray, read your Bible, go to church, tithe and, if you're Pentecostal, speak in tongues. I mean, that's pretty much what you're going to get. Pray, read your Bible, witness, make other disciples, tithe and speak in tongues.

My point there is that a disciple is far more than that and it really juiced down to this issue of *Not I, but Christ who lives in me.* Yet, if you ask the typical Christian the question, what does it mean to live by Jesus Christ? What does that look like? How does it happen? You're going to get a blank stare. That's one of the examples of what I say about the superficiality.

Many Christians today, particularly young Christians because my main audience, 20s, 30s and 40s, are trying to sell somebody on a place that they've never been to themselves and the big thrill is, hey, we got another one. Oh, yeah, we got this guy to say the prayer. Oh, we got this guy to go to church. Never asking the question what is a disciple in the first place. So that's one example of what I'm talking

Ray: I love the way you expressed that because, to me, that whole mentality of 'we got another one' feels a little bit too much like Amway for my liking.

Frank: Yeah, it does. I mean, there's a thrill to bringing people to the Lord and there's a thrill to getting people wherever it is, the venue that you're involved in, whether it's your church or your Bible study group. That's all great, but where do they go from there. There's something far more than pray and read your Bible. Anyway, that's kind of an example, I guess, of what we're talking about.

Ray: You said you write almost always, I think is what you said, out of your own experience and your own struggles and questions. Do you ever start in one place before you write something and then by the time you get to the end of it you realize, I was wrong and I've had to change some view or some idea or some knowledge that I thought I had. Just the writing process itself, does it change you?

Frank: Yeah, that's a great question. As you know, Ray, and knowing me as you do, I'm never wrong. I've never written anything that was incorrect.

Ray: That's true. I forgot!

Frank: No, but for me, personally, what it is, is my thoughts are always being clarified and my way of putting things is always being refined. So if you give me a book that I wrote in 2008 and I look at it, to me, it's a torturous thing to do because once I write a book and release it I never want to look at it again. But, if I'm forced to open it up and look at it and skim through it, which I have done before, this is what it looks like in my head. Oh, my

goodness, I could have reworded it this way. Oh, no, I should have given an example here. Gosh, how could I have missed the scripture that I should have added right after this sentence?

So it's more that kind of a thing, to be able to restate things, reframe them, and illustrate them. Of course, I'm always growing, but I don't remember a point, at least not since 2008, where I said oh gosh, I was totally wrong on that. Although, in my own thinking in my mind before I write something I'm constantly reassessing things. But, in terms of reframing them, making them better, clearer and so forth, definitely that's a consistent, constant thing and, to me, it's a frustrating thing.

I'm a perfectionist, so I never get to the place where I feel like a book is perfect when I turn it into the publisher. It's more like what Winston Churchill said. At first it becomes a mistress, then it becomes a toy and then, finally, it becomes a monster that you're enslaved to and you're just so sick of it you just fling it to the public because you're frustrated so much with it. So that's pretty much how I feel. It's like, all right, I'm done. I don't want to do anymore. I'm trying of seeing this. Here you go.

Overall, I feel good about what I have written. Although, being the perfectionist, I always like to improve how I word things.

Ray: Well, you are prolific. I tried to find an answer to this question before got on this conversation, but I couldn't find a definitive answer. I own a lot of your books, but I can't find the number. What's the official number of books that you have written?

Frank: I think, I think the official number is 20 all together. Now, that's 11 published books by Christian publishers, conventional Christian publishers. So you have 11 of those and then the rest are self-published digital books, but I think it's 20 total. One of those 11 books, it was actually my first book, I wrote that in 2005 and that was with Destiny Image, then there was a three year hiatus. Then I wrote the 10 published books after that beginning in 2008 onward 'til today and, also, the 20 digital books. So I've written 19 books since 2008, whatever that is, seven or eight years.

Ray: So what's your practice of writing like? There's a story that Stephen King tells when he is speaking anywhere, like he's doing a reading or making a public appearance and there's Q&A time, somebody always wants to know what kind of pencil he uses. He says it kind of scoffingly like, knowing the pencil that I'm using is not going to make you a writer.

As a writer myself, I'm always curious about what other writers practices are and how they work, so can you kind of give us an idea of that. How much do you write every day? Do you have a word count? Do you write on a computer? Do you write on a notepad? How does it work for you? What kind of pencil do you use, Frank?

Frank: Well, for me, the question would be, what kind of crayon do I use? It's a blue No. 2, that's what I write my first drafts in.

Ray: Okay. That's the answer, blue No. 2.

Frank: Yeah. No, there are several ways I write books. I have three processes that I go through, depending on the genre of book. Sometimes they are spoken messages that have been transcribed and then I take the transcription and I begin to edit. When I say 'edit' I mean edit ruthlessly because the spoken word is so different from the written word.

Ray: Yes.

Frank: So take a book like *From Eternity to Here*. That is made up mostly of conference messages throughout the country. That's one example, that book. Other times I will write from scratch a new work and there I begin with a table of contents, which will change over time as I write. I just fill-in each of the chapters according to the subject matter in the table of contents and then I write, write, write and rewrite.

As some people have stated, I write "drunk" and I edit sober, which means I'm just throwing paint on the canvas. The writing part is simply writing without really paying attention to anything other than getting the words on the paper. The other process of editing is really where you begin to refine, mold, shape and make it cohesive and coherent. So those are two, I won't talk about the third way.

I don't have a regimented schedule. I'm not one of these people that write 1,000 words a day, my personality is not cut out for that. I can't do that, but I find myself, Ray, writing constantly. I would say most every day I'm writing something because I do have a blog and I do have an up-to-date newsletter and I write an awful lot of emails in response to people's questions. So I'm constantly writing and then I'm always working on a book. I more write when I'm inspired, unless I have a deadline and then I write when I'm not inspired.

Ray: Okay. Let's talk about deadlines. Are you the kind of writer who is pushing right up to the edge of the deadline or are you done way ahead of time?

Frank: Well, okay, I'm a plodder not a crammer, so I don't wait until the last minute. I have a co-author that does that and I've written two books with him. I'm writing a third with him and he waits until the very last minute and writes 90% of the book at the very end. So I have to, basically, follow that pattern, which I don't like, because we're joined at the hip when we co-author.

I'm a plodder, I will write a little bit at a time over a long period of time. Usually, with deadlines we have a year from the point that the contract is signed or when the contract is signed, so I like writing a little bit, a little bit, a little bit and then getting to that point right before the deadline where I'm just so sick of it. I'm tired of writing, I don't want to write anymore, I'm out of juice and I give it to the publisher.

So I guess the short answer is I wait until the deadline, but I don't cram. I plod, but I do get it in on time.

Ray: I want to be like you. I think I'm more like your writing partner, but I dream of being like you are.

Frank: Well, I don't know if you want to be like me because it's not the nicest place to be. I wish I was a crammer because it doesn't seem to be a bother for him. He's written many books and has published with many people, but he has a way of making the publishers push the deadlines back. I don't really like to do that. Nevertheless, it's what he can do. Now, I think part of this is procrastination. For me, Ray, I don't know where you come out in terms of concluding your thoughts on this, but it seems to me that we procrastinate because we don't really like what we're doing or maybe we like doing other things more.

At least that's me when I procrastinate on things and so what I've learned to do is, number one, try to just do the things I like to do, which is impossible to do all the time, but if I don't like to do something I try to get that out of the way first.

Ray: Yes, I agree with you. I'm much the same. Brian Tracy wrote a book about time management, I think it's called *Eat that Frog*, and he's like, if you wake up and you know that today you have to eat a frog it's best to eat the frog first thing and get it over with.

Frank: Oh goodness.

Ray: Kind of a guttural analogy, but nonetheless.

Frank: Yeah.

Ray: Okay. You mentioned earlier that you have both published with traditional publishers and you've also done self-publishing. What are your feelings on those two things? A lot of people think with traditional publishing it's done with and other people think that that's not true. What's your opinion on those two worlds?

Frank: Well, in my experience, because I've done both and I still do both, I still go with traditional publishers for some of my books and I self-publish the digital books. If you want to see your book in bookstores, even if you go with someone who will print the book and you get a great designer that makes it look really nice, you're going to have a hard time getting that book into bookstores. Unless you are a repeat bestselling author and I would say probably a mega bestselling author, it's going to be very hard to get it into bookstores.

The other thing, too, is when you have a book that's published by a conventional publisher there's a certain amount of credibility that comes with that. Because there are so many self-published books today, there's not a whole lot of credibility in the eyes of many that comes with that.

On the other hand, if you have an audience, you have a built-in audience, you have a following, you have readers in place already then it may make sense to do some of your work with a designer or so, or digitally, perhaps, if you want to get a printer and pay a printer to print it out and make sure you get a nice-looking cover on it.

It may be something to consider, to self publish, because the advantage there is, number one, you don't have to deal with editors and editors can be a nightmare for an author. You don't have to wait on decisions to be made by the publisher in terms of cover and so forth, you make all those decisions yourself.

Secondly, if you're looking to monetize, if you're looking to earn money through writing and writing books particularly, you can make a lot more money per book with doing it in a self-published medium, but you're going to have to have some kind of a readership in place or else you're not really going to get many people to look at it or buy it. So this is where the question of tribe and platform comes in.

For me, there are certain books that make sense to do digitally, which is a self-publish mechanism for me, and then there are other titles that I will only go with a publisher because I know it's going to get a wide reading. It will get into the bookstores. It will go through their marketing channels, etc. So that's what I would say on that question.

Ray: Okay. I want to get to the tribe and platform subject in just a moment, but before we do something that occurs to me is you talk about self-publishing versus traditional publishing, like you just decide which one is best for this book. Yet, I think, for many people, they feel like, well, I can't get a traditional publisher, so how is that even a decision to make. How did you get your first publishing deal? How did that happen?

Frank: Well, that's funny because I was experimenting many years ago. I was experimenting with self-publishing, actually having it printed, I had a cover on it and so forth. I was doing this many years ago in the '90s and a publisher found some of my self-published work and was interested in publishing it.

The publisher at that time made an offer to me and I accepted it because I thought, you know what, I've never looked for a publisher before, but this is something that I think will be a good thing for me. So I went ahead and did that and that opened the door. Because the book did well, that opened the door for many other books to catch the interest of publishers.

Early on, a very well known Christian author gave me some advice. He said, Frank, for many years I have published books -- and he's gone with traditional publishers from the beginning -- but I did not have a book agent. I didn't know this, but I ended up hurting my books because an agent will actually get you a higher advance and a higher advance means that the publisher is going to do more to market and promote the book and get it out there in front of people. Because he would always take low advances, not having an agent to negotiate for him, he was hurting his books.

So when he told me that, you know, I'm not the brightest guy in the world, but I know how to take advice and he had the ring of truth. So he put me onto an agent and ever since I've had an agent. So whenever I do a traditional published book I have an agent, but you already have to have a book that maybe you self publish.

It could even be a digital book that's done really well, people have read it in large numbers and there's been a viral dimension to it to where a publisher is going to say, you know what, if we publish this person people are going to buy the book. Either that or you have to have a fairly large platform.

I know several authors, brand new authors, they've never done a book before, Ray, but they have built blogs that have had massive readerships. Because they have so much traffic on the blogs, they have landed publishing deals with major publishers and the advances they have gotten are very high.

First-time advances from a publisher, if you have a large platform, are usually higher than people who have been writing for a long time because they're gambling. They don't really know your work. They can't measure it against anything except looking at that platform. So some of these people get very high advances on the first book they publish, just because they have so large of a platform.

Ray: Let's talk about that because you've got one of the most successful Christian blogs on earth. I think a lot of people probably look at that and think, well, that's great for Frank because he's Frank and everybody knows him, but that's not the way it started. What was the process of building your blog and what's your readership now?

Frank: Oh, I don't know. It depends. I think, on average, the last I checked it was something like 80,000 monthly readers. It's not bad, but it's not the greatest thing in the world. I mean, I'm not Max Lucado or Charles Stanley or Joel Osteen, Ray, I view myself as a regular guy who's written a few things and there's an audience for what I have to say. I think that's the key. For people out there who have something to say the question is, is it unique enough to be able to find people, an audience, a tribe, as it were, to use Godin's term, who are interested in it. To not only consume it themselves, but to share it with others.

I started blogging in 2008 on the free WordPress.com blog. I just did it as a hobby until 2012. I found out that a lot of bloggers were monetizing their blog and actually earning an income from it and I thought, you know what, I like that idea. I could use some money here. I don't profit personally from my book sales, so that was one thing I saw that was attractive to me. I could actually write, not charge a penny for it and, yet, through advertising and affiliates earn income from the blog.

So I really did a lot of work in reading everything I could, taking courses, talking to many professional bloggers to find out what was working for them and I became really intentional about learning how to build an audience that was faithful and loyal to what I had to say, that were being helped by it and that would bring other people to it.

My message is different than what's out there, in most cases, and I think that's the key, Ray, is to have a message that is distinct and unique from what's out there in your particular subject matter or your genre. Even if you have a small audience, if they're loyal and faithful to what you have to say and they're being helped by it, genuinely helped by it, they will spread the message to other people. If they find others of like mind and like heart, then you can build a readership that's really being helped by what you have to say, they find it valuable and they'll share it with others.

I would say that as a way of encourage to anybody. You don't have to be a name. There's a lot of very successful bloggers right now that if I mentioned their names nobody would know who they are, but they have massive audiences because they're writing to a certain audience that finds what they have to say distinct, unique and of help. So that's what I would say to your listeners on that point.

Ray: Well, it's very inspiring because you are very successful and your blog is very successful. You said you're not on that level of like Joel Osteen, Max Lucado or people like that, yet you have 80,000 or so monthly readers. For most people, I think that is something that feels completely out of reach for them. What I like about what you've done is you just studied what other people were doing that was successful and you started implementing those things.

Frank: Yes.

Ray: You're very disciplined, it's kind of a blue collar ethic that you have about it. It's like, well, this is what you do. This is how you put it together. I guess I wonder. Do you feel like anybody could do this or were you just in the right place at the right time? Could somebody still go in three years from zero to 80,000 monthly readers? Is that still possible?

Frank: I think it is, depending on a couple things. One, first of all, you have to be able to write in a way that... How do I put it? You've got to be able to spell. You have to be able to write

a sentence that is fairly grammatically correct. You have to be able to write, say, on at least a seventh grade level.

Ray: That has been my problem.

Frank: Well, I was going to mention that, but I thought that wouldn't be too nice on your own show! No, you have to be able to put together cohesive sentences. You don't have to be a flowery, eloquent, gifted writer. You don't have to have any of that, but if you have problems with spelling and you have problems with grammar you can still pull it off, Ray, if you get an editor to read everything you put out.

I actually have a good friend of mine, he has a blog. It's fairly well read. It has a lot of good traffic. He's a horrible speller and he can't really figure out the grammar. He's not good with that, but he has a friend who is a superb writer, not a published author, so every time he writes a blog post he gives it to his buddy. His buddy edits it, cleans it up, makes it correct, fixes the errors and then he publishes it. So you can do it.

First of all, you have to have a passion for writing, number one. Number two, you have to have a message. You've got to know what it is you're conveying to people and it has to be something that's helped you, personally. Quite frankly, if it hasn't helped you, personally, if it hasn't solved problems for you, if the things you're writing about have not been meaningful to you, they're really not going to help anybody else. So that's huge. Then there has to be some knowledge.

This is what I did in that full year between 2011 and 2012, all I did in my spare time was learn how to blog and what worked and what didn't work. I did a lot of experimenting, let me tell you. A lot of things that I learned from the "experts" didn't work.

Ray: What!

Frank: Yeah, I know, isn't that something. But a lot of it did work and then I stumbled across some serendipitous discovers of my own that, to me, were groundbreaking and worked really well. But, if people have a passion, they're clear on their message, that which they're writing has helped them, personally, to solve problems in their own life or to bring encourage to themselves, then they can share that with others hoping to have the same effect. Also, they have to have a commitment to being consistent.

That's a big thing because, quite frankly, to be frank and I am, quite frankly, it gets discouraging to blog, especially when you're starting out. Let me tell you something, it took a long time. You've got to remember, I started in 2008. Yeah, I was intentional in 2011, but there were days, weeks, months where I was looking at my traffic and, man, I was depressed for a week. It was just, I'm doing all this work, where are the people!

Every blogger is going to face that at some point or another, usually in the beginning. Even now I'll put out a post and I'll think this is killer, this is going to help so many people and it will be a dud, you know?

Ray: Yeah.

Frank: Then other things I'll write will go viral and I'm just scratching my head. How'd that happen? But, I think there has to be a dedication to it, a commitment and an ethic of I'm

going to stick with this for a long period of time and see what comes of it. Anyway, that's kind of a long answer to your short question.

Ray: No, that's good. That's good stuff. This week, for me, on the blog the theme is 'Declare Your Writing Independence', so I love this. I think this is a great topic for us to be talking about this week. What's interesting to me is I've taken probably most of the same courses that you've taken and it is interesting that sometimes what the experts teach, as if it were handed down on stone tablets, is just wrong, it's just flat out wrong.

I love that you, even more so than I, kind of admire this. I don't kind of admire it I do admire this about you. You took the teaching you got and you just put it to the test and what worked you kept and what didn't you threw out. I think that's so incredibly powerful and wise.

Then you actually have put together a course, I think this is a good thing for us to talk about, called the Buzz Seminar Master Class. The way I would describe it is you took all that stuff you learned and you put it together in kind of a checklist and instruction manual on how to do the stuff that does work. Talk a little bit about the Buzz Master Class, how that works and what it does for people.

Frank: Yeah, I would love to because, to me, I think this is one of the most powerful, practical and helpful resources available to date. Having been immersed in all of this, you know, writing, publishing, marketing even, I can say that with confidence.

I'm one of nine presenters. We actually have a total of nine presenters and counting. We have slated a few more that are going to be added and you're one of them, Ray. For those listening, Ray did a session on the Buzz Seminar on copywriting, which is your forte.

What this is, anybody who is interested in writing, they have a passion to write or they have a talent to write and they're interested in one of two things, either building an audience who reads what they write or they're interested in monetizing their writing, that is, receiving income through their writing, this is an immensely valuable resource for them.

What it is, in essence, it is a writing course, a blogging course, a publicity course, a copywriting course, a marketing course and a publishing course all rolled into one. You're learning from nine different experts in these various fields on the best practical tips and pieces of advice that they can give, including myself, the things that have worked for me and juicing it down to very practical steps.

Not only that, but people who become members of the Buzz Seminar Course, they get the course, become part of a larger community called The Hive. This is a community that connects everybody who's taken the course or went to the one live event we had to kickoff the course. It connects them all together, so you get access to the community, people asking others questions, whether it's on their blogs, their books, publishing, publicity or what have you. So it's a community helping one another and then access to all the presenters. It's just a powerful, powerful thing.

Can I share a pet peeve of mine right now, Ray? Do you mind?

Ray: Yes, go for it.

Frank: There's something on my heart that just happened yesterday!

Ray: Tear it up!

Frank: Okay. There is probably not a week that goes by, I may be exaggerating there, maybe there is a week that goes by, but I would say almost every week I will get an unsolicited email from someone who I don't know, never met them before and the email goes like this. They all sound the same. Hey, Frank, I just came out with a new book. It's called, they give me the title. I want to send you a copy. Then they say, I think your readers on your blog would really love it, too, so it would be great if you could say something about it.

I'm talking about a lot of people. If I counted up the emails I get like that, Ray, it probably would be over 100 over, say, the last few years. It's a lot. They are clueless to the fact that they are spamming me, number one. I don't have a relationship with them. I don't know who they are. I have two bookshelves full of books that people have sent me. Now, that's kind, it's a kind gesture to let me see your book, but I don't have time to read these books. I'm a slow reader, by the way. I'm reading books that I have to read that I don't really want to read for research for my own work.

Ray: Yes.

Frank: But, they don't understand that they're asking for a promotion free of charge. If bloggers did that that's all they would be doing, they'd be promoting other people's work. There's a certain naivety involved there, a certain audacity. Here's my point.

What To Do Now

So you'll have to tune in next time to find out exactly how Frank resolves this situation, what he recommends you do if you want somebody to promote your book. Don't do it the way he just described. I'll just give you a hint, that's not the way to do it. We'll have those answers and a lot more in next week's conclusion to this interview with Frank Viola.

Don't forget in the meantime that the Buzz Seminar Master Class is available right now and I highly recommend this course. It's BuzzSeminar.com/edwards. There's a link in the Show Notes if you go to RayEdwards.com/171. The reason you want to use that link is if you buy through that link I will give you a special gift, a free gift I will send to you if you buy through that link.

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