

My Freelance Experience

"Surfing Chaos Naked"

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Surfing Chaos Naked

“Surfing Chaos Naked” was how I described a special summer in 1995 when change and challenge were testing every facet of my life. I sadly drove away from my marriage of ten years to a Palestinian man (that’s another story), unknowingly heading back to a father dying of cancer, taking a two-year-old in tow and trying to reach home (Cleveland, it was no joke). I was worn out and spent the summer as a child, with a child, living with my parents. This allowed me to rest for the first time in years. I hung out with my girlfriends at the neighborhood pool. Dad was diagnosed with cancer three months after I arrived and passed away that summer. Of course, my brothers couldn’t resist saying that it was his way of getting me out of the house. They were absolutely right.

You would think I’d be crazy going after winning the misery trifecta of death, divorce, and bankruptcy. But that was not true. I was in over my head and knew that there wasn’t anything to do or control. “Surrender” seemed like the only viable option. It wasn’t something I read in a new age book. I was overloaded and could only float. I was too tired to paddle. As a person who enjoyed “thinking” I was in control, my “do nothing” stance was uncharted territory. I was surprisingly peaceful, relieved to be back home and out of a marriage that wasn’t working. At 42, I was worn out and wanted to heal.

My girlfriends suggested that we visit a studio where energy and healing touch practitioners worked on clients for a nominal fee. This arrangement was perfect for me. Touch without involvement was a beautiful thing and it prevented me from hastily heading to the next relationship. Actually, it was a dream that prompted the visit. For two nights in a row, I had the same dream and heard the words, “You must birth your grief.” I didn’t understand. What grief? My dad? Leaving my husband? It was deeper and involved a rape that I thought was left behind in my early twenties and never discussed (that’s another story too). It was resurfacing and refused to be ignored. My spiritual side intuitively knew that this journey home was about healing on multiple levels.

There was no rest when it came to my family. They were concerned that I wasn’t searching for a “real” job, which of course was a full-time job and afraid that I wasn’t working hard enough to support a child and myself. They were correct. I was in emotional trouble and stopped dead in my tracks. I had been a mess prior to that time but didn’t really want to explore the reason why jobs dissolved and projects were left unfinished when I still had to get through divorce and bankruptcy.

All I knew at this moment in time was that an advertising copywriter position no longer suited me and would end in disaster. However, I didn’t have a clue as to why it wasn’t satisfying. I was good at the creative challenge and it kept me working for years. I had won lots of awards, had great contacts, a portfolio of enviable projects with major national accounts – but I felt like an imposter. Before moving back to Cleveland,

I diverted from advertising and went to graduate school to study film. It was a wonderfully creative experience and fun. As a teaching assistant, I discovered my passion for the classroom. Advertising felt lifeless and soulless to me.

It was hard to escape advertising because that was how I made money and that's what I knew. I worked on film projects on the side but the payoff was often times speculative. I did not like the full-time pressure cooker of the advertising world where you are only as good as your last project. In a self-deprecating way, I often referred to myself as an "intellectual waitress" or a "migrant creative." The transitory nature of working in a creative profession was not as joyful as a single parent. It was a job nonetheless and paid the bills.

The advertising world already troubled me. The idea that jobs changed as quickly as accounts were lost or gained collided with a strong family work ethic. My father worked in the same management position at U.S. Steel for over three decades and created his own engineering technical school with my mother. I had a financially secure childhood where my needs were met. However, I viewed freelance as not quite a "real job." The tradeoff was definitely the flexibility to spend time with my child and work on myself. In the 1990s, freelance positions were abundant and the economy was strong. I was writing for the Internet and projects for many different corporations. I could live on 35,000 (at the time) because there was no cost of maintaining a home, lots of clothes for work, etc. I managed to find plenty of free things to do with my daughter. I did not really think about the future. I was just trying to get by one day at a time.

My hourly wage, in the early 2000's, ranged anywhere from \$25 – \$100 depending on the clients and projects. I still carried the old model of a "regular" job in my head (whatever that meant). I did not have any role models or instruction to pave the way when it came to freelance. This dissertation is most likely an attempt to help people, whether employees or employers, to navigate and better understand the freelance world.

Perhaps my past had infiltrated my psyche and undermined my relationship with advertising. As a rape survivor, I knew what the backside of creating false desire was about. People are always hungry and never quite satisfied whether it was a relationship, work or materials things. When feeling desperate, powerless – they'll lie, cheat, steal, kill and even rape to get what they want. I was uncomfortable in the world of advertising, but it was familiar. I just didn't have a backup plan and lacked the energy to really change. Plus I had a kid to take care of and she became my focus. I was basically floating and waiting for the right wave . . .

Happy Playing in the Water

I taught film at a local university and freelanced when my daughter was around five. This gave me a lot of flexibility. I felt connected and revitalized. Freelance copywriting allowed me to make enough money to "survive" and still enjoy my child. I accepted the fact that freelance offered a life instead of a lifestyle. Freelancing was exactly what I needed to transition to something else (whatever that was going to be).

Teaching media, although not paying nearly as much money as freelance because it was part-time, allowed me to connect with students and share a passion for film and life. I was happiest teaching and loved the interaction and stimulation that students provided. I was able to rent a place to live in the neighborhood that allowed for a quality education for my child and so we could spend time together. Her needs (not wants) were met. That was good enough during that period. I did not think about making money as much as healing past hurts. The bodywork continued and helped to make peace with myself. The drama was subsiding. I was happy playing softball, hanging with friends, and parenting. I liked teaching and was thinking about how to make that transition. During a softball game, Alice Kolb a professor in the Organizational Behavior program at Case Western Reserve University suggested that the Taos/Tilburg Ph.D. program would be perfect for me. The seed for change was planted.

Tired of Paddling and Going Nowhere

Cleveland was not the easiest place to navigate in terms of work at the time. The city was already in a state of decline having gone from being an industrial titan to one struggling to forge a new identity. When working on freelance jobs for various enterprises, everything from Internet to advertising agencies, I was relieved to leave each time. The pressure in the workplace was palpable. Almost every business that I worked for was suffering financially. Freelancers were used instead of hiring full-time workers and having to pay costly benefits. This was in the early 2000's when cities like Cleveland were starting to lose jobs.

Freelance work confirmed that I did not want to stay in this business but needed the income to survive. Surprisingly, I was relieved to freelance and leave each time. I was writing copy for websites that allowed me to make \$80 - \$100 an hour. It was excellent money when the work was there. In one month, I made \$20,000 writing Internet copy for a large multinational corporation. The downside is that I had no benefits, security or health insurance. My daughter did have health insurance through my ex-husband.

The irony is that I my work ethic was strong and I have never missed a deadline. I did not seek freelance jobs but they came to me through old advertising connections from years ago and friends in the community. I was lucky that I did not solicit work and had the philosophy that whatever I needed would come to me. I compared going after freelance work to dating – if I wanted it too much then it wouldn't happen.

Perhaps my laissez-faire attitude when it came to not chasing work came from the peace of letting go during the divorce process. I was worry free and that made everyone else around me worry more. I learned to accept the philosophical stance that freelance work comes and goes in waves. I never turned down a job and wrote about things I knew nothing about (had to learn of course). I was not fearless – but feared less. With freelance, you need to have faith that things would come when you need it. It is a profession that requires confidence in your ability to adapt to any situation. It trains you to accept what comes to you as a learning experience and to take on just about anything that comes your way.

The plus side of freelance was leaving behind the everyday melodrama of dealing with competitive coworkers and jockeying within a corporate structure. Oh, I even had a taste of it on a freelance basis. I worked for this one company that wrote classified ads for large organizations. I remember my boss jokingly giving me a Rorschach-like test at work. She said with a surprised tone, “The results read that you’re creative and professional. That’s so NOT true.” I was horrified, surprised, and responded, “Why do you hire me?” She said, “Because you’re creative and get the work done.” I commented, “Doesn’t that make me professional and creative?” She said, “No because you just don’t play the game.” I basically explained that I liked freelance because I did not require playing the corporate kiss-ass game. I then seriously asked her, “Do you want me to kiss your ass?” She answered with a big affirmative “YES.” I was so wrong – and soon gone. Creativity and professionalism have nothing to do with work. It’s how well you get along in “their” corporate culture that keeps you operating as a freelancer. It’s not just about being professional, getting the job done, and meeting deadlines.

When Liz was in sixth grade, the job loses in Cleveland were accelerating and people were fleeing in large numbers. The situation that screamed it is time to get out and find a “real job” was when I had worked for a rather large Internet company as their only freelance writer. I had four jobs in the works. I had completed two of the writing assignments and had not been paid for months. There were two other jobs that were in process. Something did not feel right about the length of time that had elapsed because they traditionally paid a few weeks after submitting the invoice. I called and mentioned to the account executive that I needed to be paid before submitting the final drafts for the other two jobs. Immediately, they sent the checks for the two completed jobs. I then finished the outstanding two jobs on time and submitted the final billing. I was not paid after a few months of waiting. Some time later, I got a notice from a Chicago bankruptcy court in the mail stating that I had to pay back the money recently received because I had been given “preferential” treatment. I did not consider being paid for work completed as “preferential.” No, I did not pay this company back – since they still owed me money on two jobs. The hassle with needing a lawyer irked me. Luckily, I had a neighbor that was a lawyer.

Changing Course

My landlord notified me that they were selling the rental house and I needed to find a new place to live. My daughter was ready to transition from elementary school to junior high and I saw it as the perfect opportunity to move from Cleveland Heights, Ohio. My intention was to get a full-time teaching position and find a place where I could eventually retire and the climate was kind. I knew that without the doctorate it would be tougher to secure work. However, I had two master’s degrees in a related field (film and telecommunications) coupled with years of professional multimedia expertise and positive teaching experience. I forged ahead and interviewed for two university teaching positions in the South.

I have been at Winston-Salem State University, a historically black college in the University of North Carolina system, for the past six years. It has been a good ride on many different levels. A full-time teaching

job provides the structure and non-structure that allows for security and time off for creative projects. I'm currently following my passion and have designed an interdisciplinary creativity course – *Brains and Guts: Anatomy of Creativity*. The workload is challenging teaching four multimedia courses a semester. But I have summers and vacations to work on my creative projects. I was glad to make the move from relying solely on freelance. Now, I would welcome any and freelance opportunities in the summer. My attitude has changed because past hurts have been healed.

Hanging Tight -- More Security, Greater Worry

Yet, the strange thing is that I worried less with freelance. With a full-time job and especially with the economic recession, I was definitely more fearful about losing my job (even a tenure-track position), I now appreciate the beauty of a steady paycheck and have more to lose. With freelance, you have the psychological mindset of nothing to lose and everything to gain. I am betting that it is tougher now with so many people out of work and competing for freelance. The influence of the recession on freelancers will be a topic of discussion in my dissertation.

Researching and Riding the Next Freelance Wave

Liz is now 17 and ready to leave for college in a year. She has taken up surfing, is in the National Honor's Society, chess club, well traveled, and doesn't capitalize on her drop-dead gorgeous looks. As a parent, I've done a good job of balancing work and taking care of my daughter. Freelance allowed me to survive a tough emotional time.

Currently, I am preparing students for a growing innovation-driven, project-based economy and that is why I am examining the role of the media freelancer. In the past, the focus has been on the "how to" aspect of contract work but not on how it affects the individual, the people that hire them, and the labor force. One of my heroes, Studs Terkel, wrote the brilliant collection of stories about working people in the 1970s. I was fascinated with *Working* because it had everyday people describing and commenting on what they did for a living. There was no glamour or "how to" attached to his stories. These reflections captured a snapshot of where we were as a culture. His stories are still relevant today and very reminiscent of documentary style filmmaking.

In my dissertation, *The Migrant Creative*, I am intent on exploring the world of the media freelancer and how this will transform a culture facing the loss of traditional employment positions. Even my doctoral adviser Dr. Saliha Bava the editor of the *International Journal of Collaborative Practices*, is working as a freelancer. I'm already enjoying the research because it has become clearly obvious with the recession that the old way of doing business is under assault and new models need to be examined. Conversations with freelancers and the individuals that hire them will help us explore, better understand and ride the next freelance wave.