

Who Needs Financial Stability, Anyway?

By Heather Sharfeddin

The universe is littered with scraps of wisdom telling us to follow our dreams, do what we love, etcetera and so on. I can't tell you how many motivational management workshops I've attended in which the leader took us out of the office in an effort to lead us toward our deepest desires for fulfillment. We had a little name for it, my colleagues and I. We called it Business Church. In the Notes app on my phone is an entry from one such session a few years ago. I identified through some elaborate process of word elimination the three values most important to my happiness. Creativity. Time Freedom. Intellectual Challenge. In that order.

I've always worked for nice companies. Polite companies that actually make good products and take care of their customers and employees. And the irony of those leadership exercises was that they were intended to make me a better manager and employee. By understanding what motivates me (as if I didn't already), I could be more productive. Yet the first two values I listed were nothing my corporate career could ever adequately provide me. While one might argue that intellectual challenge was a possibility, a daily wade through office politics, project meetings, budget planning, and personnel issues left scarce room for it. If I eked out two hours of devoted time to market strategy and understanding the latest industry trends, it was nothing short of a stellar week.

The thing about working for a nice company is that nice companies are the dream-killers. They lull you into believing that your life is fine with their retirement plans, groomed campuses, bonus checks, and employee recognition programs. But for some reason they continue to make the mistake of assuming that the personal dreams of their employees are in any way aligned with the organization's business

objectives. Each year when our “Leadership Summit” invitations arrived I wanted to take the CEO into a room and insist that this exercise in sentimentality and inward reflection would serve only one purpose: to highlight how supremely dissatisfied I was. A truth I was adept at suppressing until they invited in those dynamic speakers and workshop leaders with their little tricks to get us to vomit our passions onto the carpet and then pick over them for useful bits. I wanted to raise my hand after the introduction and clarify for the speaker and my fellow colleagues that a) we aren’t really pursuing our true passions but more of a sentimental feel-good thing, and b) the leader, of course, would be putting this into the context of what we do here in order to keep us creative types from flying out of the lines and mounting a rocket ship to the outer reaches of our dreams, which was entirely possible and highly probable due to the fact that that’s how we are. And, after hearing my clarification, if the speaker failed to accommodate I would beat him senseless with the compass we received one year as a reminder to stay true to our dreams.

Instead, I wrote. I wrote in the wee hours of the night. I wrote on Saturdays and Sundays. I wrote on my vacations. I began to enjoy some publishing success, but financial security was squarely tied to my corporate career. I wrote in the airport. I wrote on my lunch hour. I published a novel. My 401k inched up. I took time without pay to write. I got a nice bonus check. I published another book. I got promoted. I completed my MFA in fiction. I took a six-figure position at work. I published two more novels that earned me pennies by comparison to the corporate job.

The whole balancing act was working, sort of. I was being both responsible—saving for my retirement, paying down my mortgage—as well as indulging my creative passion. People marveled at me. How do you do it? they asked. Oh, you know... I laughed. And when they invited me to join them at the Blazer game or David Gray concert or fill-in-the-blank I said no. Monday comes early, and I couldn’t afford to lose the writing time.

I met other writers once in a while. Writers who lived in little studio apartments with no television. Writers who drove twenty-five year old cars, when the cars were even running. I met writers who applied for scholarships to attend AWP, even though they were in their mid-forties. And I envied them. They seemed more like real writers.

These other writers eyed me with suspicion because I didn't share the hardships that bind a group together. I wasn't drinking Two Buck Chuck because that's all I could afford. I was... some weird hybrid. A corporate manager with a dental plan and a late model sedan, just a notch below luxury, who happened to have four novels out in the world. And no, those novels were not self-published. My strange, undefined identity left me on the margin of the literary world. Little did these real writers know, I suffered hardships of my own—hardships that were never so obvious as when I was asked to write down my dreams and share them with a room full of my non-writer colleagues.

Then I came down with a severe case of writer's block that lasted and lasted. The problem with being a blocked writer is the innate sarcasm that boils out of you at the first sign of sentimentality. Blocked writer sarcasm is nothing to be controlled. Like propane and matches, there is an instantaneous reaction. I found myself glowering at my coworkers as they shared their gratitude for the excellent workplace environment. I suppressed my need to f-bomb executives who allowed under-performing employees to putter along because they had gone to high school together. And when anyone rattled off some sappy advice about following your dreams, I had murderous visions.

My pre-blocked writer dream was that I would reach a place of financial security in my writing and then I would, at last, be able to devote all my time to it. In my dream I exited corporate life with my health insurance, my personal possessions, my assurance of the next meal. My blocked writer sarcasm was telling me, "Yeah, right. And you're a goddamn fool if you believe that's going to happen while you're still young enough to make it count."

For all the world's sentimental quotes, there is nothing sentimental about following your dreams. The price is high. And you have to be willing to pay it. At what point does a successful career woman with a bright financial future finally pony up for the real dream? As I sat in the far back rows at the memorial service of one of my corporate heroes and heard the sappy, sentimental quote, "Life is too short not to do what you love," I finally threw my hands up and quit my job.

So, I'm a real writer now. Just a writer. And I may be broke soon. But as for my values: Creativity – check. Time Freedom – finally, yes, check. Intellectual Challenge – all day long, as much as I can handle, check. And I don't know how this will go.