



« TIME TO WRITE »

Writing on the FLY

Here's some hard-earned advice from writers who lead 'double lives' and have learned to make them work

By Sandra Hurtes

“DON'T QUIT YOUR DAY JOB.” These foreboding words, often spoken to writers by those not in the profession, seem to hold expectations of failure and poverty. Whenever I hear them, I smile to ward off the feeling of doom. It's not that I disagree. The number of writers who can actually support themselves as writers—and that includes the most talented and prolific—is woefully small. The majority of us must have a separate

and reliable means of support so that we can create.

Recently I talked to a number of productive writers who appear to have managed well their “double lives” of holding down a day job while making time to write. Their comments may offer you some useful tips and inspiration for your own writing life, and perhaps even a new appreciation for some of the advantages of that day job for your writing.

First, a few cold, hard truths about

the financial payoffs of writing, courtesy of Jonathan Segura, associate reviews editor at *Publishers Weekly*, who writes at a *Powells.com* blog: “Give up those dreams of a million-dollar advance. Not gonna happen. Set your sights somewhere in the \$1K-\$20K range, because that's what you should realistically be getting paid.” If you're thinking that the reward for years spent writing your book will come, remember: An advance is for the finished product, not how long it took to write. And from that advance,

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you'll pay your agent and taxes.

How then does someone who feels *compelled* to write—for example, award-winning poet Gretchen Fletcher—survive financially in the real world?

Fletcher, a poet by night and a fifth-grade teacher by day, says, “I need a day job to eat. The occasional prize or pay for a poem is \$50-\$100, which goes toward postage and paper and ink.” And at a deeper level, the Fort Lauderdale poet says, “I wouldn't want to write full time. I just love fifth graders and the subject matter. I also need order and structure. They're going to put on my tombstone, ‘She was efficient.’”

The benefits of a double life

In addition to a salary you can count on, structure is a tremendous payoff from a day job. My own efficiency rate shoots way up with my day jobs in place. I know exactly when to schedule my writing as well as the other pieces that make up my life. And by replacing money worries and providing built-in boundaries, the muse can be freed.

“I could never sit around writing poetry—or traveling to writers conferences—without a sure salary coming in,” agrees Fletcher, who is married and has two grown sons. She began her writing career crafting scripts for travel videos she and her husband produced. “The poetry came when I saw how much I enjoyed compressing big ideas into small packages,” she says.

Her first chapbook, *That Severed Cord*, was published last July, and the month before she was one of five poets to win the national Times Square poetry contest. The \$1,000 prize money was only part of the reward—she also read in Times Square while being simulcast on a billboard high above Broadway.

On a day-to-day basis, Fletcher makes her double life work by efficiently managing time. “I can get a lot done in five minutes,” she says, “and I don't take my day job home with me.” She grades and plans for school during lunch and prep time and while students are working. That way, she spends a part of every day writing, which often means revising and submitting to contests and publications—a hefty job in itself.

Her job never appears in her poems,

but the two do feed one another. She encourages her students to write, especially poetry. “I love words,” she says, and she loves demonstrating to her class the importance of each word. She says, “Sometimes I wonder, am I a writer who teaches or a teacher who writes?”

The art of making time

Teaching can seem like the ideal job for a writer, with summers off and days ending earlier than corporate America's. However, for Santa Fe author, columnist and high school literature teacher Robert Wilder, making time to write is an art all its own. Married and the father of two young children, Wilder credits his understanding family for his ability to make it all work. “All” includes writing a monthly column for the *Santa Fe Reporter*, giving readings from his latest essay collection, *Tales From the Teacher's Lounge*, doing occasional stints on NPR, and keeping up his day job and writing.

Wilder's life provides the material for much of his work. “If I'm in the classroom or at a parent-teachers conference, I look at situations from a writer's point of view,” he says. In that way, everyday life shows up in his work—even taking his kids to soccer. Wilder also does a weekly radio show called *The Daddy Needs a Drink Minute* and is a keynote speaker on parenting and teaching.

Wilder finds time by writing early in the morning, away from the distractions of home. After waking at 5 a.m., he goes up to school, where “no one will bother me. Once 8 o'clock comes, high school kids think if you're there, you're accessible,” he says.

His early-morning writing time, then, is crucial for getting his work done, since his after-work time is for family. Making the best use of that time means not checking e-mail or the cell phone, and augmenting his time by writing at a café or park during lunch. Wilder continues his morning schedule through the summer, which can at times be disconcerting. “I'll see my colleagues fishing, and sometimes I feel like a ghost,” he says.

“I'm not really supposed to be at school. I'm haunting my life.”

He advises new writers to develop a network of writers who understand what it's like juggling responsibilities. Working alone can be lonely, especially when others around you are socializing or vacationing. Wilder also stresses the need to be disciplined and to make writing a priority. “You can be less talented and more disciplined and be more successful than someone who is more talented and less disciplined,” he cautions.

And what does “successful” mean to him? “Writing, especially memoir, allows you to have a relationship with your mind, a great relationship. All those hours you spend writing and thinking teach you a lot about who you are. That's pretty great. Most people don't get to have that.”

Learning to focus

A relationship with one's mind can indeed breed enormous satisfaction and creativity. Such was the case

with Stacy Sims, a Cincinnati writer and Pilates studio owner. While vice president of a graphics-design firm, she began studying Pilates. After studying twice a week for three years, she says, “I began taking on new challenges and started living a fully realized life.”

Writing her novel *Swimming Naked* was one of those challenges; it emerged, she says, “between the Pilates work I did and work I did to get sober.” That included 12-step work, yoga and dance. “Before sobriety and Pilates, I was the kind of person with a million ideas racing and zero follow-through,” she says. By learning how to be still and focus, she was able to “understand my own story versus the story that I was meant to lay out on a page.”

Sims quit her corporate job to finish her novel, living for a few months on just enough to get by. During that time, she became certified as a Pilates instructor and began teaching. Today she owns two Pilates studios and licenses two more. She also runs a teacher-training program and a nonprofit program called True Body Project, with a mission of

“All those hours you spend writing and thinking teach you a lot about who you are.”

—Robert Wilder



empowering girls and women “to connect to their bodies and grow their authentic voices.”

As for her own authentic voice, Sims has branched into other genres. In addition to completing two more novels—and developing one of them into a play that will be produced in Los Angeles next year—she’s produced a documentary and performance work.

With a son in college, financial pressures remain, but her parenting time is now freed up. “When I have a spare second or two, I try to work on my own creative work. I’m also single,” she says. “And while I hope to change that, I’m aware that it has given me an incredible opportunity to be hugely productive.”

With two day jobs she’s emotionally invested in, finding the time to fit her writing job in isn’t easy. “I don’t have an expectation that I will write every day,” she says. “Except for revising my play, I haven’t had time to write in two months.” She reconnects with her writing by going away for short periods of time and writing nonstop. That means spending enough time with her characters that they “tell me everything I need to know,” she says.

She advises writers, “Don’t waste time on unhealthy habits, like spending your time thinking about how you are not writing! Thoughts are energy, and they can keep us stuck.”

A patchwork existence

Stuck is exactly how I often felt before finding what Sims would call my authentic voice. I began writing in my

early 40s. With much enthusiasm and belief in my talent, I was sure I’d make a living writing feature articles. I set up a home office and hung up a shingle saying “In Business!” But I quickly discovered that earning a livable salary took skills I lacked—the ability to network like crazy and bang out assignments, fast. I was a terrible self-marketer. And as for writing fast? I over-researched and rewrote my intros a zillion times.

These obstacles forced me to rethink my goals. I needed a day job (or jobs, as it turned out). Temping as a secretary and/or proofreader served me well for years. I added to that taking writing assignments, submitting personal essays, teaching writing in continuing-education programs, and substitute-teaching grades K-12.

Essays were my passion. They gave me a form for expressing myself in ways I had never been able to do verbally. I seemed to float from bed to computer in a trance, without stopping to brush my teeth, to revise, write, or compose cover letters—before leaving for work. At night, I wrote fiction between 10 and midnight. That gave me an outlet to write playfully, as I had no illusions about writing a bestseller. Single and childfree, I could work odd hours and exist on a hodgepodge living.

A few years ago I yearned for work that gratified me as much as writing. I returned to school for an MFA so that I could teach college. Now, I teach freshman comp and proofread and fact-check at ad agencies. I’m still patchworking a living, but am satisfied on a day-to-day basis, enjoying the mix of academia and business.

As for writing for a living? Other than penning a few features a year, I’m writing essays again and revising my memoir.

Tethered to a firm—and liking it

Figuring out a how to create a meaningful life that included writing was a long process. Perhaps that’s because I came into this career later than many.

For those who knew at a young age that they were writers, the work/life balance has been an easier one to design.

Jillian Medoff, a New York City novelist and senior consultant at a management consulting firm, has been writing fiction all her life. Her first novel, *Hunger Point*, was made into a Lifetime movie, her second, *Good Girls Gone Bad*, came out in 2002, and she’s currently working on a third novel. “I knew even as a child,” she says, “that if I was going to write novels, I would have to have a day job as well. I never wanted to be dependent on what I write as a sole means of support.”

Partnered and a mother of three children, she says her family understands that she has two careers, and that the money from her books is invested for college expenses and retirement.

Organization is key to making her two careers comfortably coexist. At her day job, most of her clients and colleagues are unaware she’s an author. Her Web site (www.jillianmedoff.com), though, is focused on writing. One way the two careers complement her, she says, is, “I’ve learned that in business, rejection isn’t a personal thing. As a fiction writer, I am rejected on a continual basis. Having a day job doesn’t mitigate the sting, but it allows me to detach a little bit and channel the disappointment elsewhere.”

In addition to the income of her corporate career, there is the structure and discipline that so many writers need. For Medoff, that discipline is not only for the time to write. “I’m truly a better novelist for having a corporate career,” she says. “I’m more disciplined, more realistic, more business-savvy. Corporate America can strip you of dignity. But there is real artistry to be found

there. As much as I dream about writing full time, I can’t imagine not being tethered to a company.”

She makes it work by planning her week in advance, devoting specific time to each job. Her corporate job is also junior to her skill level, which she’s chosen by design. Working four days a week at her corporate job, she writes at night

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—Jillian Medoff