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Do What You Love (and the Money Might Follow)

By Laurie Uttich
UCF Forum columnist
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When I was an undergrad in the middle of the *Material Girl* 80s, I don't remember anyone — a professor, a parent or even a random guy on the street (or in the career counseling center) — ever telling me to “do what I love and the money will follow.” And while author Marsha Sinetar released her book with the same title in 1989, the year I graduated from college, it never showed up as a graduation gift.

Instead, I heard “Get a job.” (And: “You’ve only got six months before you start paying off that student loan.”)

I was encouraged by many, of course, to find work that I would enjoy, that would maximize my skills and my creativity. I was raised to believe money didn't matter all that much. But I wasn't told to “find your passion” and, if I was, I'm not sure I could have found it...even if you'd given me a glass of wine and a life coach.

It's possible this is a Midwest sentiment. I grew up in the heartland, raised by first-generation Americans. We're known to be relentlessly practical (and polite). And, it's possible, I was told this and no longer remember because I didn't take it seriously.

This may seem odd to my creative writing students and people who know me well, because I am a person who is passionate about many things, especially reading literature and trying to write it. My mother says I began reading at 3 and even if she's exaggerating, my favorite childhood memories are summer days in the hammock with my library books. When I wasn't reading, I was writing or, at least, watching the world as a writer does, observing and analyzing while trying to make meaning out of it all. Not

much has changed in 40-some years. But still it seems odd to call it my “passion;” it’s simply who I am as a person. The act of writing rarely feels like an act of passion. It just feels hard.

After graduation, I spent the next 15 years writing for various advertising and marketing companies. I wasn’t passionate about these positions, necessarily, but there were projects I became passionate about. At night, I still read and I wrote what I wanted to write, not what I was paid to do. I joined writing groups and book clubs; I went to workshops and readings. I published a few things. I even got paid a few times. I’m mathematically challenged, but if I had to guess I’d say I average about .0002 cents an hour for my creative work (and that’s probably a high estimate).

I suppose to many that doesn’t feel like success or, at least, it certainly doesn’t seem to correlate with the notion that “the money will follow.” The money, for my “passion,” hasn’t even limped behind me. And while I’m happy it worked out for Walt Disney and Steve Jobs, I lose zero sleep over my own “passion” income.

When I started the MFA program in creative writing in my late 30s, I looked at it as a gift I gave myself. For years, I felt as if I wasn’t improving artistically on my own. I get weary when people say “writing can’t be taught.” Of course, it can. It’s the equivalent of saying trumpet players are born that way. My professors helped me shape my work in immeasurable ways. I’m forever grateful.

While I was there, I taught as a graduate teaching assistant and found I loved teaching. After I graduated, I was fortunate enough to be hired. I tell everyone — often — how much I love my job. I work hard to do my job well and to keep growing as an educator. I feel like it was something I was born to do, but I’m still not sure I would call it “following my passion.” I am passionate about my students. I am passionate about the work we read and the work they write. I am passionate about the service-learning work they engage in. When I stop being passionate about these things, I’ll find something else to do. But even though the term “passion” remains problematic for me, I suppose I reserve it for my own creative work...which still hasn’t produced any real income despite a growing list of publications.

My students often ask me how to make a living as a writer of literature. I know very few people who do, so I send the students to speak with visiting authors and others in our department. I tell them about jobs they can get as students with degrees in the humanities. I'm convinced studying the arts — and trying to create your own art — makes you a better person, one this world desperately needs. I'm hugely proud of them and their willingness to pursue this path.

But I worry about this rhetoric we seem to collectively agree on, one that assumes everyone has a “passion” that's full of power and just waiting to be unearthed and used for financial gain. Some people do; some people may not. But I believe everyone has a purpose, and everyone can find activities that fulfill them. And, sure, those activities can absolutely lead to jobs, but they don't have to.

If you do what you love — or what you like or what you find important or useful for yourself or for the causes you believe in — it's possible “the money will follow.” But it's also possible, it won't.

Do it anyway.

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