



A HUMAN'S GUIDE TO FREELANCE LIVING

by
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If you do, I thank you very much.

Enjoy,

Charlie

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Freelancing is not easy work.

It's lonely, the hours can be long and peanut butter sandwiches get pretty boring.

There is a lot of fretting and confusion surrounding freelancing. Anyone making the transition from a 9-to-5 gig to this self-propelled world is apt to feel the tension.

This manifesto was written for them, although in these pages are things that I hope will get a nod from anyone.

It's written for the person stuck in the cubicle who's wondering if maybe she's broken. She's got a great job yet for some reason all she wants to do is get the hell out and start her own business.

It's written for the person who is wondering if it really *can* be done. Can you actually work from home doing something you love? And still eat?



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I think the freelancer is a different breed of cat. A breed that often gives up “perfect” security and comfort for something they fear is much more tenuous.

Often we don't even know why we do it. It just happens. On Monday the cubicle is fine. Then we get an idea and start to wonder...

And every day after that the cubicle just gets smaller and smaller.

Don't worry. You're not broken.

You've just caught the bug.

And as far as I know **there is no cure.**

But there are ways to manage the symptoms and that's what this manifesto is all about.



TRADE IN YOUR DOWN TIME

You can be good at anything you put your mind to. The corollary is that if you don't put your mind to anything you won't be good at any of it. And that's totally fine. It's okay to suck at something as long as you **suck at it on purpose.**

But if you want to be good at something you have to put in the time, and as much as possible. If you put in eight solid hours toward attaining a skill, you'll be better off than if you only put in four. It's got something to do with talent, but a lot of it is just math.

"But I don't have four hours to spare!" you say. I know you don't have four hours to spare. Nobody does, that's the whole point.

So put in twenty minutes instead. Leave the television off. Cut down your shower time. Keep your space clean so you don't waste time with clutter. Use one plate instead of three. Or don't use any and eat right out of the pot.

Do what you can to give yourself time to dream and time to produce, and bank every second of it towards your future.



SURROUND YOURSELF WITH EXCEPTIONAL PEOPLE

Tiger Woods has done more for the abilities of his competitors than any revolutionary infomercial putter in existence. The competition is getting better and better simply because Tiger exists and strikes fear into their nine-irons.

So what if Mickelson still loses by 3 shots? He'd have lost by 12 if Tiger didn't scare the shit out of him. At least he's a better golfer now. And sometimes, like when Tiger is attacked by a freak hippo on the back 9 or his leg just happens to fall off, the rest of the field gets a chance to steal the show because their game has been elevated.

Don't get yourself down that someone may be better, richer or faster than you. Let them **inspire you** instead. Do your own good work.



READ A LOT

I say read a lot for the same reason I say surround yourself with exceptional people. There's a lot to learn and the best place to find it is in books.

There is magic and other worlds in books and if you don't read about them you're missing the whole point.

Some people say they don't like to read and I can understand that. What's fun about passing your eyes back and forth over symbols on a page? That doesn't sound like a great time to me either, and I read about four books a month.

But that's only the action of reading, the means to an end. The end is the story, the magic, the hero getting together with a scantily clad princess. The reason we read is not to exercise our eyes but **to be taken away** to some other place.

Those who don't like it just haven't found that place yet.



FALL OFF THE HORSE AS OFTEN AS POSSIBLE

There's nothing wrong with falling on your ass every once in a while. Hell, there's nothing with doing it every single day, provided you **pay attention**.

The only thing wrong with making mistakes is not learning from them. Then they're just a waste of time.



BE HEALTHY

Your first responsibility is to yourself. Eat right, exercise and sleep.

Getting ill is the biggest waste of time ever. So is being tired. When you're squinting through puffy eyes with a head that feels like it's stuffed with wet cotton balls, just go to bed already.

Four hours of work done on no sleep and four hours of work done on a good night's rest are **not equivalent.**

You may think you're saving time by sleeping less, by skipping breakfast or your morning jog.

You're not. You're only shortening your attention span, creativity and possibly your life.

And trust me, freelancing is much more profitable when you're not dead.



GOOD COMMUNICATION ALONE WILL SET YOU APART

My very first week as a freelancer taught me a valuable lesson. Possibly the most valuable lesson I've ever learned.

The first commission I ever got was a logo design. The fellow had hired me because his other designer hadn't been responding to his emails.

The second commission I received was for someone who'd already hired another designer. She said the bid I gave her via email gave her a good feeling about me. She gave me the job.

My first week continued in this way, and at the end of it I tallied up what had been successful and what techniques I'd continue to use to scare up work for myself.

I discovered something interesting. In that first week, 100% of the commissions I'd received were awarded based not only on my portfolio but the quality of my communication.



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I took that to heart and made the decision that I would communicate to potential clients as if they were friends of mine.

To this day, I still get a great number of clients who've simply gotten fed up with someone else they've hired.

Being second or third in line doesn't mean you lose.



DON'T BE TOO CRITICAL

You know what my big problem is? I'm lazy. Laziest guy you know. I work my ass off for two reasons and only one of them is money. The other is so I can sit around and do absolutely nothing but read a good book.

Maybe there's something about you or your work that's not perfect. So what? Move on and don't sweat it. If you criticize yourself, you're done for, simple as that.

Sure, competition has killed a lot of great ideas. So have economics and lack of planning. But you know what kills more ideas than anything else? You know where most great ideas die?

Right behind your forehead.



DON'T WORRY ABOUT COMPETITORS

Forget about the other guy. If you consume yourself with what your competitor is doing you're only going to be as good as him.

You can only follow someone so long. Then they stop suddenly and you run into them, pushing your nose up into your brain and killing you.

Nobody else can produce what you can. **Your ideas are your ideas** and they can't be found in any store or on any shelf.

Maybe your product is sort of similar to another product out there. That's fine. What's this fascination with complete originality anyway? It isn't going to produce a blockbuster item.

A pitchfork that serves as eyeglasses is an original idea. A story written in a language that only you understand would be original. And nobody will ever buy a single one.

Don't reinvent the wheel. Just figure out a way to make it bigger, better, rounder.



CARRY A SKETCHBOOK

Sketchbooks are brilliant and a necessity for anyone who values their time and ideas.

Writing down your ideas will keep you from forgetting them. It will also keep you from saying, “Oh jeez, I forgot,” which just makes you sound stupid.

If you've got a sketchbook there's **no such thing as wasted time**. You can use your sketchbook to work, write, sketch, think and practice your craft no matter where you are. You can do it while waiting in line, riding a bus, eating, walking, standing in the elevator lobby or taking a poo.

Waste of time? Too bulky to carry and not worth the effort? I disagree. This manifesto was written almost entirely while out and about on my feet.

Write that down.



PAY ATTENTION

There is a lot of greatness in this world. There is also a legion of things that royally suck.

The best way to find what sucks and what doesn't is to **look and pay attention**. Something that sucks might be a lot better with one simple improvement that nobody else has thought of. If you're the one who thinks of it you've just made yourself a market.

There's also no better way to discover a new passion, hobby or talent than to look around and get inspired.

This is no excuse to covet thy neighbor's wife, but you can always covet your neighbor's piano playing.



TALK TO PEOPLE AND LISTEN TO THEM

Just as there are great things and sucky things in this world, so too are there great and sucky people. Problem is you'll never know who's who if you never meet them.

And when you do meet them and they start talking, you should listen. You can tell they're talking because their mouths will be moving.

There are fascinating and talented and wondrous people out there. There are people with opinions that could save you time or spark some brilliant idea. There are people who need and want you for **precisely what you do**. There are people who could inspire you into a field you'd never even thought of. You may even be really really good at it.

There are also people who would love nothing more than to stab you in the eye. Watch out for them.



GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY

Do you ever wonder what it was like when little Mozart played piano for the first time? What if he hadn't played? What if he'd had a piano and never even touched it?

Try everything, get your hands dirty, keep busy and take some chances. You may not like any of it but at least you'll have some stories to tell. And besides, it's way more likely you'll find a bunch of stuff you really like to do.

And you know what the best part is? The more stuff you're good at, the easier it is to be good at other stuff. You'll build confidence, control, competence and assurance that **you can make things right and good and beautiful.**



DON'T LISTEN TO AUTHORITY

No, I don't mean break the law. Don't create havoc or be a jerk. Anyone can do that and nobody's impressed by it.

I mean Authority. The pundits and critics and folks with their "I know best" attitude.

Maybe there's something out there **you've got a knack for**. But how you gonna know if you stop just because some guy with a string of fancy letters after his name tells you to?



DON'T DEAL WITH LOSERS

I wish I could define “loser” for you but I can't. We all have different levels of tolerance, and who am I to say who can give Cinderella her glass slipper?

But we don't really need a dictionary definition either.

Does being around someone bring you down? Does someone make you feel smaller or squash what you are that makes you *you*?

That's a loser. **Kick 'em to the curb,** every single one of them.

“But I can't do that,” you say. “I've known him for years!”

Well, maybe that's the problem.



BE ETHICAL

I almost left this one out, fearing it was too preachy or even hypocritical. I'm no saint, believe me. But this is a big piece of the happy-living puzzle, so it stays.

If you create products you know are lousy, you've had it. If you purposely hurt people just to expedite your own caprice, you're done for. If you don't do what you say you're going to, or if you make money by fraud you're going to hear about it one day. Possibly from a lawyer but more likely **someone's fist.**

Every thief who's taken a free ride off someone else's hard work will say I'm full of shit, and maybe I am. It's probably easier to steal a dollar than to earn one, I don't know.

But personally I'd rather sleep with a smile on my face and never need to look over my shoulder.

Do good work, don't walk on the little guy and help your neighbor out. Keep the karma points or whatever you believe in balanced on your side.



PICK YOUR PASSIONS

There's no such thing as a normal life.

A person stuck in the 9-to-5 drudgery may love it while the guy in the next cubicle over is tearing his eyes out.

Life is something you create for yourself. Life is chasing your dreams and passions and the things you fear you'll never ever get.

Those are the things you should be working towards. One at a time, two at a time, eight at a time, it doesn't matter.

Light your own fire. Your life and your work will be so much easier.



DON'T READ THE NEWSPAPERS

I know this sounds irresponsible but newspapers just aren't worth your time. At least about 90% of them aren't, judging by headlines.

Bad news, death, destruction, babies falling in wells and drunk drivers running into ostriches. This is the "important" information we have a habit of keeping ourselves abreast of.

Now, I don't mean to be callous, I really don't. I've suffered ills just as you and all of our neighbors have. We're strangers to misfortune none of us.

But seriously, how often have you experienced absolute catastrophe? How often do you leave the house for work in the morning and find a boatload of starving immigrants sleeping on your doorstep? How many subway cars have crashed into your swimming pool, sparking the gas pipeline in your backyard and engulfing in flames a housing development full of orphaned children and kittens?



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The newspapers would have you believe that's all pretty common. They'd have you believe there's hell around every corner. And that every high-rise window sill has a vault precariously perched on it, ready to fall on you as you pass below.

Make this test for yourself. Go out and buy a newspaper. Go home and grab a sheet of blank paper and make two columns on it. Label one column "Important" and the other "Could Possibly do Without."

Now read the entire newspaper front to back and put each news item in whichever column you feel is appropriate. You may be astounded by what you find.

Bad things happen. That's just the way of things. **Concentrate on the good things.**

Keep your head up and out of the newspapers. You'll not only have more time for work, you'll also feel a lot better.



MAKE SOME FUCKING NOISE

You can't expect much attention if you never get noticed. Publicize yourself, your products, let people know what you've got and what you can do for them.

If you don't advertise and do all your best work behind the walls of your private studio, nobody's going to know you exist.

There's a lot of competition out there.

The **race sometimes goes to the loudest.** Make sure you've got yourself a big bullhorn and go find a street corner!



DON'T QUIT YOUR DAY JOB

So you need a day job. Big deal.

That doesn't make you a failure.

It makes you smart because now you've got less to worry about. You don't need to worry about eating and paying your bills.

What's wrong with working, anyway? I know every time I take a vacation I want to slash my wrists by the end of the second day. Boredom is a life-killer.

Switch your thinking on it instead. Take the money you make on the job and save it. Apply it to product development, guitar lessons, synthetic polymer research, watercolor supplies, publishing your own book. It's yours! Use it!

You can **build your own empire** with a lot of hard work and a little bit of money.



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So before you go hang your boss from the gallows or run over his dog, milk him for all he's worth. Make him as much money as you can by doing your best work while you're at work. Get paid well for it, then go out and do your own thing.

And one day, when you've made it huge out on your own, you can run your yacht into his beach house.



STOP BEING REALISTIC

I've heard a lot of people say "be realistic" in freelancing and indeed all of life. I'm guilty of saying it myself.

I've changed my mind.

I changed my mind because I never believed it in the first place.

The very last commission I received was for a design job that I frankly didn't know how to do. The client had sent me a big email, one of those that scrolls for days. Line item after line item went by and I read them all, shaking my head at code I didn't know and acronyms I didn't understand. "No way I can do this," ran constantly in my head and I even said it out loud once.

When I finished reading it and wiped the sweat from my brow, I wrote him back and said the same thing I always do.

"No problem."



IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT YOU

My favorite thing about freelancing, and the thing that so often elevates it above just another job, is the people I meet.

It took me about thirteen seconds to realize all freelancers wear a badge, and stitched on the badge in big bold red letters is the word **help**.

Never have I met a more generous and giving group of people than the freelancers I've met. There's something very refreshing about a total stranger simply asking for help when they need it. And it still amazes me when a complete stranger offers me a hand in return.

Sure, there's always the jerk out there. The person who can't help but point out the one word you misspelled in your blog post. But they're the rarity.

So get out there and make friends. Put trust in someone who may not even deserve it, and be yourself worthy of trust.

Nothing will make you smile like receiving an email that simply reads, "Thank you!"



BREATHE, DAMMIT! BREATHE!

Have you had that feeling come over you? That one where you've just finished a huge project and things are suddenly eerily quiet? Your head and your desk are clean and empty. And just for a second or a tiny portion of one you forget who you are.

That feeling means work has begun to define you, and we all know it should be the other way around. There's an easy cure:

Go outside, look at the clouds and **find an alligator.**

Go feed the ducks.

Walk your dog or walk your children.

I know you're busy. I know you've got deadlines.

But, that's the wonderful thing about deadlines. They'll always be there when you get back.



DON'T BELIEVE THE LIE THAT EVERYTHING UNDER THE SUN HAS BEEN DONE

Just because this has a religious background and fancy parable behind it is no reason you should buy it for a single second.

This adage kills dreams, kills hopes and has suppressed more artists and grand thinkers than anything. Anyone who's ever said today is good enough never did a damn thing to make tomorrow better.

You could draw me a picture right now that nobody's ever seen. You could write a poem nobody's ever read. You could tell me a joke I've never heard or bring me to tears with nostalgic tales of your childhood.

Sure there are lots of books around, lots of music, lots of art. There's lots of this and that all sorts of the other, but have you seen it all?

Neither have I.

And tomorrow is full of even more new magic we've never seen.



Which part of it will be yours?

Don't worry about fate and destiny and things being set in stone long before you even existed.

You're not a puppet. Check your knees and elbows. Find any marionette strings there? Didn't think so.

You've got just as much imagination in you right now as all the artists in the past.

You've got more ability than you know what to do with. Anyone who tells you differently doesn't know who he's looking at.

You don't need permission from anyone.

Don't ever catch yourself asking for it.

