

Do What You Love & the Money ~~JOY~~ Will Follow

words by Sherry Belul

When the folks from Mabel approached me about writing an essay about money, my first thought was "Holy shit; why me?" I'm the last person in the world who should be writing about money. My grandmother was a poor farm girl and my grandfather came over from Albania. My parents lived paycheck to paycheck and always struggled to make ends meet. I've screwed up almost every opportunity I've ever had to make or save money. Instead of choosing the financially savvy path, I've always followed my heart—and while that's led me to oodles of joy, I'm a living example of someone who does what I love... and the money *doesn't* follow.

Here's another one: I felt sorry for my college friends who donned crisp suits and went to work for corporations while I skipped off to Manhattan to savor a small amount of work and great amounts of free time.

There is this story about throwing away a perfectly respectful job as executive director of a nonprofit in order to follow my creative dreams. But I could also tell you about the regret over the loss of title, responsibility, retirement plan, and health insurance.

And then there are all these stories: I'm proud of myself for leading a creative life, full of so much love and joy. I compare myself financially to everyone I meet. I get a pit in my stomach anytime I look at the bank balance. I get ecstatic when I get an email from someone touched by the work I do. I create product after product but despite all of the training and best-practices I know, I simply am not able to adequately sell.

But here is my biggest money story, which carries my greatest shame: my ex-husband (whom I live with so we can raise our son

There are, however, *stories*. And I have a lot of money stories.

Let me begin with this story: I have always been ashamed of my financial status. As a child I was embarrassed my clothes came from JC Penny and our family never took a vacation anywhere but to my grandparents' house in small-town Ohio.

within a family) has carried the bulk of our expenses for years.

I've had moments of complete despair, when I've been panicky over how in the hell I'm going to turn this money thing around and start carrying my load in this family. I've had other moments in which I'm sharing breakfast with my son, my ex, and my beau, laughing out loud at the silliest joke between us, feeling as content as can be. What is the difference between these two? The bank balance didn't change, so what did?

It was the focus of my attention. And I have to re-focus this attention every day, because I get snagged around money each and *every* day.

That story about my ex? Well, if I turn the telescope just a quarter inch, this is what I see: While my biggest shame may be that he needs to prop me up financially, my greatest accomplishment is that we have been raising our son, Kayne, in an unconventional family situation full of

joy, warmth, and love. Kayne has two parents who work from home and are emotionally and practically available to him. No amount of money could have bought this.

Not having much money nudges my beau and me to think outside of the box if we want to have extraordinary experiences. That looks like grabbing the boom box and a bottle of Two Buck Chuck and swing dancing on his rooftop while the sun sets. That looks like bringing a table and chairs to a local park, dressing up in thrift store Gatsby attire, and hosting a 1920's al fresco luncheon for his parents. It looks as simple as him reading aloud to me from a good book as we curl together under a quilt, candles glowing around us.

For my family, it looks like celebrating birthdays by watching the sun rise together and kicking around the Santa Cruz Boardwalk taking photos of all the color. It looks like our annual "Holiday Hoopla," where instead of Christmas gifts, we host a day of zany customized games and adventures that result in tons of laughter, stories, and memorable photos. It looks like my mom and me declaring an everyday Tuesday as "Fiesta Night" and dressing up like Frida Kahlo.

Not having much money as a child led me to create one-of-a-kind meaningful gifts for friends since I couldn't afford CDs or Izod sweaters. Those childhood experiences seeded my current business, which helps people express their love and appreciation for family and friends through imaginative and impactful gifts. So for my work, the lack of money looks like a focus on love.

Yes, money is tight, but if I focus entirely on my bank account, I get paralyzed with fear and shame. My energy plummets. My enthusiasm for life wanes. When I'm focusing on what I *do* have, rather than what I *don't*, I am living in a world rich with currency. The river of abundance is flowing right through my living room and I'm like little Charlie in Wonka's Chocolate Factory, gulping down the rich sweetness and enjoying every sip. Imagine if Charlie had spent his day at the Factory comparing himself to Mr. Wonka and dreading returning home to his family's squalor. He'd have missed the whole adventure.

I don't know. Maybe if I keep doing what I love the money *will* follow. I'm not giving up my quest to earn more money, but the real work of my life is pulling back the curtain on the stories of lack—and living in the richness of what *is*. ©



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