

The artist's heart and free spirit offer a path for some journalists cut loose by chaos in the media

By Jon Funabiki

I've long believed that you and I—the artist and the journalist—have a lot in common. After all, we're both storytellers who are trying to interpret the world around us. We're passionate about our work to the point of zealotry. And, we're both optimists, driven by the belief that our work matters, and that it can move and inspire people.

Now, as you no doubt know, a lot of my friends have become jobless, squeezed out of their newsrooms like the last smear of toothpaste from the tube, as the old news companies crumple under the weight of the rising giants of technology ... Google, YouTube and Craigslist, oh my!

And do you know what's interesting? A lot of my journalism friends are becoming more like—and please don't take this wrong—you and your struggling artist friends, the ones who patch together various bits of employment in order to maintain a living. Maybe they skip from one freelance assignment to another, teach a class or drive a cab a few nights a week. The rise of nonprofit journalism now has reporters chasing after grants. Sound familiar?

Here's what's phreakin' interesting, my friend: The most adventurous of my journalist friends have used this as a time to reinvent themselves. They are experimenting with ways to connect their personal passions to journalism. In doing so, I believe that they are emulating artists—they have become more in touch with what their own hearts are saying, and they feel freer to do something about it. And, instead of writing to faceless newspaper readers, their new work has pushed them into a intimate relationship with specialized audience, people who harbor similar passions and dreams. But they have to work at it.

This was the line of thought that struck me while I was moderating a session about changes in media at the Dynamic Adaptability artists conference in San Francisco earlier this year. I was asked to explain what I meant. So, here's how my thinking goes...

Take for example Michael Chihak, whom I've known for 20 years. He's a hard-core journalist who worked his way up from being a wire service reporter to being the editor and publisher of a number of newspapers in California and Arizona. When the newspaper business began to sour, Michael looked inward to see the future. He decided to go back to school—culinary school in San Francisco—because cooking has been his personal passion and hobby for years. He wants to do it professionally, even if this means the occasional accident in class, like the time he sliced his hand while learning to core a fresh tomato.

Michael was a bit groggy when I called him one recent morning. He had worked the deep fryer in the back kitchen of a soul food restaurant the night before to fulfill an on-the-job training requirement for school. “This is not a profession for an old man like me,” he joked. “Though I played college soccer 40 years ago, I’m a lot less physically capable now than I was then.”

Here’s The Plan: Culinary school just ended, so Michael and his wife packed up and moved back to Tucson, which they consider home. His wife expects to land a management job with a nonprofit organization, and he plans to launch a new career in the kitchen of a restaurant, somewhere.

Where’s the journalism in all this, you ask? If you’re a foodie, you may already know Michael. He has been blogging for the San Francisco Chronicle’s website, posting his adventures as a culinary school student, everything from how to make okra pickles to his growing awe of the skills of master chefs. [Michael’s blog](#) includes a photo of himself wearing a chef’s beanie. He plans to continue blogging and will write a book based on how he “reinvented himself as a 60-year-old man and learned how to julienne a bell pepper.”

Where’s the art in all this, you ask? Michael said he agreed with my conclusion that he was uncorking something akin to the artist’s spirit. He compared the no-nonsense writing he might have done as a journalist—“City Hall burned down yesterday”—with the approach he takes in his blog.

In one post, he marveled at a talented Japanese pastry chef’s calligraphic artistry: She decorated the rim of a dessert plate with “Congratulations” and “Happy Birthday” in melted chocolate. He was instructed to practice every day for two weeks. “It’s doubly challenging—hands tired from a day of kitchen labor add to my natural lack of calligraphic rhythm,” he wrote. “Yet after a number of almost laughable efforts, I have turned out an almost passable offering or two.”

Blogging frees him to expose his personal revelations: “I blogged yesterday about seeing all these Latinos walking down the street, every one of them is on the way to a restaurant job. Now I’m one of those.”

Michael’s use of the word “I” is seismic.

“I usually wrote a weekly column as a newspaper editor or publisher, and you would never find a column that started with the pronoun ‘I,’” he said. “As a traditional journalist, I was not only uncomfortable with, but not familiar with, getting inside of myself and talking about how I was reacting to something. And I think that’s the essence of art, it’s an expression of self.”

You have to understand the culture of journalism to appreciate the magnitude of this shift. Journalism, as it has been practiced and taught, asked the journalist to distance himself from the subject. The traditional journalist was supposed to stick to the facts and avoid opinions (though many critics will scoff at this claim). Some journalists even take the pledge of “objectivity” to mean that they can’t join community groups or vote in elections.

Thus, the freedom to say “I” becomes transformational for Michael and other journalists on the cusp of change. Jonah Lehrer, the author of *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, notes that Walt Whitman didn’t become a poet until he lost his job as a reporter when his newspaper folded.

“It was during these difficult years when Whitman was an unemployed reporter that he first began writing fragments of poetry, scribbling down quatrains and rhymes in his cheap notebooks,” Lehrer wrote. “With no audience but himself, Whitman was free to experiment.”

Journalists can be so devoted to the profession that it’s hard to imagine doing anything else. This was the wrenching tug-of-war felt by another friend, Cheryl Clark, a veteran reporter who covered health, AIDS, the environment and other topics at the San Diego Union-Tribune. Fearing huge, impending layoffs in 2008, she turned in an application for a “buy-out” package. Five minutes before the deadline, she panicked and literally dashed to the human resources office to try to retrieve her application. As she related the story, I thought of Dustin Hoffman’s sprint to the church to stop his old girlfriend from getting married in that classic movie, “The Graduate.”

But the clock struck 5:00, Cheryl was too late, and her application was accepted. Luckily for her, she later was offered a job as senior editor for HealthLeadersMedia, a large, national healthcare company based near Boston. She writes about a topic she cares about, earns a salary and benefits, and works out of her remodeled garage. “The great thing is that I’m learning tons about the delivery of healthcare,” she said. “The bad thing is that I get quite lonely not having a newsroom to pad about in, and see friends and hear gossip.”

On the other hand, Jeannie Wong wanted to vault the invisible wall between journalism and the community. She was a longtime reporter and editor until she left the Sacramento Bee 2 ½ years ago, frustrated by the challenges of raising twin girls while also running a department at the newspaper. Recently, she launched her own writing and social media marketing service with the idea of assisting nonprofit organizations and small businesses, especially ones started by moms like her. As a journalist, she couldn’t join community organizations, but now she’s “just wanting to explore what I’m passionate about.”

“This is my chance to focus my skills on something good,” Jeannie said. “I’ve been able to discover the core person that I am. Because I’m pursuing something that I’m doing for good, I don’t feel like I’ve taken a step back. That’s really freeing.”

In a revealing nod to the importance of family, Jeannie named her business [JAMM Information Group](#) after herself, twins Analisa and Mia, and husband Marcos.

“We’re listening to our hearts,” was how Greg Gross explained how some newsroom refugees are experiencing a new freedom in the face of job loss. A mutual friend of Jeannie and Cheryl, Greg’s 35-year career in journalism was cut short when the Union Tribune included his name on a list of 190+ employees who received layoff notices in May of 2010. A talented reporter, Greg has covered everything from serial killers to military affairs, and he taught himself Spanish so that he could staff the newspaper’s Tijuana bureau. Philosophical, Greg offered that unemployed journalists go through what amounts to progressive stages of mourning. First they look for other journalism jobs, then jobs related to journalism and then jobs outside the profession.

“The last step is kind of a meandering into an area that tell us where our heart belonged to in the first place,” which is how he ended up starting a blog called [“I’m Black & I Travel.”](#) The idea combines journalism with his love for travel and desire to combat the stereotype that most African Americans don’t. Go there for travel advice and encouragement. As his “about page” says, “He wants to share experiences and advice with his brothers and sisters who travel, and encourage those who don’t to get out there with the rest of ‘us.’”

I sincerely doubt that the Union-Tribune would ever have allowed to Greg to use its pages to write to his “brothers and sisters.”

Greg elaborated on this point in a Facebook message after we spoke:

“When you're in someone else's employ, you're constantly in a balancing act between the parts of the job you love and the parts you hate—and even if it's a truly great job, odds are there will be both. It drains the hell out of you. When you're reinventing yourself according to the dictates of your heart, everything changes. No more forever struggling to balance because there's nothing there that you hate. If you don't love it, you don't do it. That's a lot less wearing on your spirit.”

The transformations described here could easily be explained as the typical job shifting that goes on whenever the country undergoes economic recession. Much like the independent artist, there are new survival skills to pick up. Greg is learning how to sell advertisements to keep his blog afloat; Michael has learned some web tricks to cultivate his audience of “foodies, other cooks, people who have their own interest in pursuing a culinary career and, of course, family and friends”; and Jeannie is learning how to market her own business.

But Michael, Cheryl, Jeannie and Greg are doing more than just replacing one job for another. I’m not sure, but it has something to do with replacing (or combining) the idea of an “occupation”—what you do to make a living—with a “vocation”—what you’re called to do.

Marc Freedman, co-founder of The Purpose Prize, argues that many baby boomers no longer accept the older, more traditional model that says that retirement is your reward for working hard. Instead, they look for an “encore career,” one that offers deeper personal meaning and broader social purpose. Interestingly, Michael Chihak used the term “encore career” to describe his plan.

I don’t think that this trend is confined to only older, middle-aged journalists at risk of being downsized. Since I started writing this essay, I’ve become more aware of other journalists— young and old—who also seem to fit this mold. There’s the television reporter who started a blog called “Donut Taco Poetry,” his three personal passions. There’s the San Francisco reporter who talked the Bay Citizen into letting him write an ongoing column focused on issues related to children’s welfare and child abuse. There’s the writer/videographer who set up shop in New Delhi so that she could develop stories and films about some of the thorny social and political problems in South Asia. In another era, young reporters were consigned to cover house fires and school board meetings.

At the graduation ceremony for journalism students at San Francisco State University, Angela Hart, the class honoree, thanked her professors for teaching her to love journalism, even if the financial rewards are poor. “The thing I want to tell you the most is to follow your passion,” she advised her fellow graduates. “Too much of our emphasis is on the money.”

Perhaps, my friend, you think it’s a stretch for me to liken my journalism friends to your artist friends. Perhaps the chaos in the media world has simply opened up opportunities that didn’t exist before. Perhaps my friends have reached an age and state of maturity in which they are compelled to focus on what is important to them, and what they want to say about it. In recent times, I’ve encountered numerous other journalists who are engaged in similar meditations. The changes in journalism have changed them. Now they may be changing journalism itself. So maybe it’s time for journalists and artists to start trading survival strategies.

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Links:

Michael Chihak/Culinary School Student, Writer
<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/mchihak/index>

Cheryl Clark/Health Leaders Media
<http://www.healthleadersmedia.com/>
www.cherylclark.com

Greg Gross/I’m Black & I Travel
<http://imblacknitravel.com/>

Jeannie Wong/JAMM Information Group
<http://wejamm.net/>