

YOUR DAY JOB

Excerpted from *Big Magic*, by Elizabeth Gilbert

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The whole time I was practicing to be a writer, I always had a day job.

Even after I got published, I didn't quit my day job, just to be on the safe side. In fact, I didn't quit my day job (or my day *jobs*, I should say) until I had already written three books—and those three books were all published by major houses and were all reviewed nicely in the *New York Times*. One of them had even been nominated for a National Book Award. From an outside perspective, it might have looked like I'd already made it. But I wasn't taking any chances, so I kept my day job.

It wasn't until my fourth book (and that book was freaking *Eat Pray Love*, for heaven's sake) that I finally allowed myself to quit all other work and become nothing other than a writer of books.

I held on to those other sources of income for so long because I never wanted to burden my writing with the responsibility of paying for my life. I knew better than to ask this of my writing, because over the years, I have watched so many other people murder their creativity by demanding that their art pay the bills. I've seen artists drive themselves broke and crazy because of this insistence that they are not legitimate creators unless they can exclusively live off their creativity. And when their creativity fails them (meaning: doesn't pay the rent), they descend into resentment, anxiety, or even bankruptcy. Worst of all, they often quit creating at all.

I've always felt like this is so cruel to your work—to demand a regular paycheck from it, as if creativity were a government job, or a trust fund. Look, if you can manage to live comfortably off your inspiration forever, that's fantastic. That's everyone's dream, right? But don't let that dream turn into a nightmare. Financial demands can put so much pressure on the delicacies and vagaries of inspiration. You must be smart about providing for yourself. To claim that you are too creative to think about financial questions is to infantilize yourself—and I beg you not to infantilize yourself, because it's demeaning to your soul. (While it's lovely to be *childlike* in your pursuit of creativity, in other words, it's dangerous to be *childish*.)

Other self-infantilizing fantasies include: the dream of marrying for money, the dream of inheriting money, the dream of winning the lottery, and the dream of finding a “studio wife” (male or female) who will look after all your mundane concerns so that you can be free to commune with inspiration forever in a peaceful cocoon, utterly sheltered from the inconveniences of reality.

Come, now.

This is a *world*, not a womb. You can look after yourself in this world while looking after your creativity at the same time—just as people have done for ages. What's more, there is a

profound sense of honor to be found in looking after yourself, and that honor will resonate powerfully in your work; it will make your work stronger.

Also, it may be the case that there are seasons when you can live off your art and seasons when you cannot. This need not be regarded as a crisis; it's only natural in the flux and uncertainty of a creative life. Or maybe you took a big risk in order to follow some creative dream and it didn't quite pay off, so now you have to work for the man for a while to save up money until it's time to go chase your next dream—that's fine, too. Just do it. But to yell at your creativity, saying, "You must earn money for me!" is sort of like yelling at a cat; it has no idea what you're talking about, and all you're doing is scaring it away, because you're making really loud noises and your face looks weird when you do that.

I held on to my day jobs for so long because I wanted to keep my creativity free and safe. I maintained alternative streams of income so that, when my inspiration wasn't flowing, I could say to it reassuringly, "No worries, mate. Just take your time. I'm here whenever you're ready." I was always willing to work hard so that my creativity could play lightly. In so doing, I became my own patron; I became my *own* studio wife.

So many times I have longed to say to stressed-out, financially strapped artists, "Just take the pressure off yourself, dude, and get a job!"

There's no dishonor in having a job. What is dishonorable is scaring away your creativity by demanding that it pay for your entire existence. This is why, whenever anyone tells me they're quitting their day job in order to write a novel, my palms get a little sweaty. This is why, when anyone tells me that their plan for getting out of debt is to sell their first screenplay, I'm like, *Yikes*.

Write that novel, yes! Definitely try to sell that screenplay! I hope with all my heart that good fortune finds you and showers you with abundance. But don't count on the payoff, I beg of you—only because such payoffs are exceedingly rare, and you might very well kill off your creativity by holding it to such a harsh ultimatum.

You can always make your art on the side of your bread-and-butter job. That's what I did for three whole books—and if it hadn't been for the bananas success of *Eat Pray Love*, that's what I'd still be doing now. That's what Toni Morrison did when she used to get up at five o'clock in the morning in order to work on her novels before going off to her real-life career in the publishing world. That's what J. K. Rowling did back when she was an impoverished single mother, struggling to get by and writing on the side. That's what my friend Ann Patchett did back when she worked as a waitress at TGI Fridays and wrote in her spare hours. That's what a busy married couple I know does—both of them illustrators, both of them with full-time jobs—when, every morning, they rise a full hour before their children awake to sit across from each other in their small studio space and quietly draw.

People don't do this kind of thing because they have all kinds of extra time and energy for it; they do this kind of thing because their creativity matters to them enough that they are willing to make all kinds of extra sacrifices for it.

Unless you come from landed gentry, that's what *everyone* does.