

It's a Wonderful Life...



How² Celebrate being a writer, *even*

in

downtimes

----- *by Ruth E. Thaler-Carter*

You don't have to go through the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of Jimmy Stewart's character in the movie "It's a Wonderful Life" to realize that being a writer, especially a freelance writer, really *is* a wonderful life. Or it can be, if you do it right. Here's my take on how to celebrate being a writer by making your writing life a wonderful one.

For me, being a freelance writer is a wonderful life for several reasons. I'm never bored, because I'm always writing about new and different topics, interviewing new people, and doing different kinds of projects. I can make as much or as little money as I need; how much I earn depends essentially on how much effort I put into it. I can write when and where, and usually how, I'm most comfortable. I can balance my work time with my personal life, giving me plenty of time with my husband, friends and hobbies. There's more, but you get the idea! And every such aspect is a form of celebration, because each one is something I've achieved on my own and built for myself.

To create a wonderful writing life that is worth celebrating, start out by looking at why you write, and then at how you write, to pinpoint what makes it the right lifestyle for you. Simply recognizing what writing means to you, and then what the writing life can mean, should be a huge step toward that life. You can't truly celebrate until you appreciate.

What does writing mean to you? For many of us, writing is our life force. We can't imagine doing anything else, or at least, we can't imagine not writing, even if we pay the bills by being a butcher, baker or candlestick-maker — whatever. We *must* write. And if that's the case, well, why not revel in that necessity? Even when stuck with a huge case of writer's block, or with an assignment that's as exciting as mud, or with an outstanding invoice that doesn't seem to have any hope of getting paid in this century, give in to the need to write and let it make you feel good. Celebrate the fact that you have a gift, even if it deserts you on occasion or doesn't support you. For some people, even that sense of knowing what they must do is elusive. So just knowing you're a writer is a celebration of sorts – a recognition of who you are and what you are here to do.

How do you express that need? Do you just dash stuff off and send it to any and every editor you can think of? Or do you take the time to craft and polish your writing, and then send it to an *appropriate* publication or editor on the basis of a little research to identify those likely outlets? If all you need to do is write what you think, you can do that in a blog. If you want to be a successful writer, you need more effort and discipline than that.

Be prepared. Be patient.

Unlike many of our colleagues, I love the actual writing process – sitting down at the keyboard, with the semi-blank computer screen tantalizing me to perform (between the screensaver and the dock full of program icons, my screen can't really be called blank); notes organized neatly to hand (usually); starting phrases and likely images dancing around in my mind. Plugging into that feeling is a way of celebrating what I do and how I do it. Just launching into an assignment is a celebration, because it means I've gotten myself to the point of creating something new, and that's always exciting.

Next, be realistic. Not everyone who wants to write does it well, and not everyone who wants to be a freelance writer can handle that lifestyle. If you've been pitching your writing projects for awhile with no publishing results, it may be time to rethink. Show one of your query letters or an actual article, chapter, whatever, to a friend you trust to be honest, and ask for an opinion. If that person has the courage to tell you that your writing needs help, don't get mad; get better. There may be something you can change to make your writing work more likely to sell and get you published. Take a class, join a professional organization or discussion list, get critiques, read in the genre you want to claim as your own to get a better sense of what you might be doing wrong, look for different markets and outlets. If it's really worth sharing with the world, there will be a way to succeed and celebrate the fact that you have information or insights that others can use.

If you've been published but are struggling with the business side of freelancing – with making a living at it – you may need to rethink being an independent writer. Not everyone is cut out for freelancing. You might be an excellent writer who functions best in a regular office, working for one publication, covering a given topic or field. Freelancing requires certain characteristics that may be hard to develop – self-discipline, creativity, organization and more. Even realizing and admitting that you aren't cut out for the writing life is something to celebrate, because every step closer to finding out who and what you really are is worth recognition.

Let's assume, though, that you're a good writer with some publishing success under your belt and a good sense of what it takes to survive with writing as your primary source of income and professional fulfillment. What are the first steps to making this a wonderful life and having results to celebrate?

Be professional. Set goals.

Get organized. Put your ideas for articles or larger writing projects down on paper. Invest in *Writer's Market* and/or *Literary Marketplace* to get a better sense of the huge – yes, it can be overwhelming – potential for getting published, for topics you write about and outlets looking for your work. Writing is work, and freelance writing is hard work.

Set goals. Don't beat yourself up if you don't achieve all of them, but aim for writing a certain amount in a certain time or getting published in a certain kind of publication by a certain time. Give yourself direction, rather than letting outside forces control your destiny.

Look for a local writers' group to join, and a national one with local or regional chapters – there's a lot to gain from belonging to national organizations, but there's also something irreplaceable about face-to-face contact, and friendships, with other writers. National organizations might provide job listings, educational resources and programs, special events and conferences, but local colleagues are often the best source of critiques and encouragement.

Be professional. Have a business card, a separate phone line (or at least a phone line not answered by your adorable three-year-old or sulky teenager), a computer with current software, and fax capability. If you don't need a website at the moment because you don't have enough published work yet to fill one up respectably, purchase a domain (www.yourname.com or some such) so you have the capability to create one as soon as you're ready. You can have the hosting company – the company from which you buy your domain name – help you set up a bare-bones website that functions as an electronic business card.

Polish your skills. If your command of grammar, usage and punctuation is shaky, you may be losing out on assignments simply because your query letters or submissions look sloppy. Take a refresher class or find a colleague to be your editor and help you learn those basics. Make sure you have a reasonable command of a standard word-processing program; the leader is Microsoft Word, and you need to know not just how to type with it but how to use its formatting and editing functions. You needn't be a total expert, but you have to be able to use the tools of our trade, and today, that means

computers and software programs. Again, take a class. You can find computer courses through the public library, local school systems and colleges, writer's organizations, and more. There's no excuse not to get up to a certain skill level in these essential professional tools.

Be prepared. Try to build up a savings cushion, because the writing life can be unpredictable. You may not make money right away. You may not make the same amount of money from one month to another. You have to buy your own equipment and supplies; you can deduct them, but not 'til the end of the year.

Be patient. It may take some time for your writing life to reach that "wonderful" level. You probably will have to cope with some rejection and disappointment when your beautiful prose isn't appreciated by every editor or publisher who sees it. When things start taking off, though, it will feel so wonderful that you won't even remember the frustration of getting to that point.

Be realistic. Get organized.

Be persistent. If at first you fail to sell your story, look for another agent, another publication, maybe even another angle.

Now that you have the elements of a wonderful life lined up, get ready to celebrate that life and revel in every success. When it works, celebrate! Don't blow every penny, but whenever something good happens – a new assignment, a published piece, a good review, a check actually arriving in the mail – treat yourself to a nice dinner out, a new book or gadget, a concert, a day off – anything that enhances your feeling of achievement and gives you the incentive to keep on keeping on.

Whenever you get published, put copies of the clipping up on your office wall, in your portfolio and at your website. Think outside the portfolio, too. The neighborhood newsstand where I get my daily *New York Times* has posted some of my local articles on the door of the office, which I find very touching – it's a lovely compliment and a great way to celebrate even the smallest of publishing successes (local media tend not to pay much, but you often get to write about really fun stuff). The manager of the apartment building where we used to live put some of my articles up in the mailroom;

also a very nice gesture – and one that led to doing some writing work for another building resident!

Send copies to colleagues and prospective clients with a brief, appropriate cover note. If you land an especially prestigious assignment or a book contract, draft and send out press releases to your local and professional media. When you get that book finished, throw yourself a party! And when it's in print, be sure to contact all your local bookstores to schedule author signings, as well as send out a new set of press releases. Don't assume the publisher will do this for you.

I hope the holiday season or new year brings you everything you seek, especially the wonderful life of a successful, published writer!