

Be Careful What You Wish For: Living the Life of a Freelance Writer

Colin Irvine
Augsburg College

“I’m a freelance writer.”

Recently, I accompanied my seven-year-old daughter and ten of her closest friends on my daughter’s big birthday bash, a horse-riding affair at a nearby farm. While standing with my arm resting on the top of the fence, not unlike *Shane’s* Alan Ladd, and chatting with the woman whose teens and tweens had organized the party, I was struck by something she said. Or, more accurately, I was struck by my response to her statement.

She asked what I do for a living, and I mentioned that I am an English professor; she said, unimpressed, that she homeschools her oldest child, adding that she also helps support the family by “doing some freelance writing.” Then, she figuratively punched me in the gut when I wasn’t looking by asking conversationally as we both watched the horses go trotting past, “Do you write?”

Do I write? Well, yes. Of course I do. I am not only an academic but also an *English* professor. But am I a “freelance writer?” Well, no. Not exactly. And do I want to be? Yes. Well, maybe.

In truth, I did, until very recently. Now, as I sit here writing in this run-down room in a remote city at a far-flung teacher's college in Southern China, I'm not so sure.

A freelance writer, according to one of the select web sites I currently have access to (I would use what I think might be an old dictionary here in my room, but – like the instructions on my instant coffee and those options in the drop-down boxes on the PC – it is in Chinese), is defined as follows: “1. freelancer. a person who works as a writer, designer, performer, or the like, selling work or services by the hour, day, job, etc., rather than working on a regular salary basis for one employer.” There is something strangely appealing about an hourly rate associated with advanced, sophisticated work; there is something conversely unappealing, of course, about an hourly rate for doing the mundane, like flipping burgers or standing at a cash register at Walmart. There is likewise a real allure to the idea of independence, and this is extended still further when we look at the second definition, which reads, “2. a person who contends in a cause or in a succession of various causes, as he or she chooses, without personal attachment or allegiance.”

Who among us hasn't perused a conference catalogue and performed a pregnant pause – even if ever so briefly – when coming across those academics in attendance who are listed as “independent scholars”? How good do you have to be to cut the tether from tenure and go it alone? And how is it one can, in reality, make a living as a homeschooling parent/freelancer or an autonomous academic? How many essays (and where?!) must one publish to buy horses or pay for conference fees?

Despite being flummoxed by questions such as these – and lacking the courage and possibly the ability to go all-in as a writer – I have dabbled in this profession over the past few

years and had just enough success to starve; I have also enjoyed this work so much that have I contemplated while grading student papers and enduring departmental meetings what it would be like to casually say in conversation that “I am a freelance writer.” While living in Norway, for instance, I wrote a highly edited essay for an American publication as well as several articles for local Norwegian newspapers in towns where I had taught. The piece for the US readers was an exercise in diplomacy, as I had to be careful not to mislead American readers or offend Norwegian ones. Those for the local papers presented challenges as well, as it was difficult to find translators and nearly impossible to get Norwegians to respond to emails (that comment right there would’ve been edited out by my superior at the Norwegian-American journal). Despite the difficulties, I made a few hundred dollars for the one essay and several thousand kroner for those that appeared in the papers. And while at the time this seemed an extraordinary amount, the hourly rate worked out to about twelve dollars, hardly enough to cover the essential expenses of a PC, travel, or food for the kids.

Buoyed by my initial accomplishments, I agreed upon moving home to Minnesota to collaborate with my brother-in-law, a fishing-guide who was looking to break into the publishing business in order to get his name and that of his company into the outdoor literature. We agreed to one fee for editing, a second for co-authoring, and third for authoring (meaning he would pay me to write as if I, too, were a professional fisherman, which I most certainly am not). After eighteen months in business, he has landed several hundred walleye and Muskie, I have caught nil, and our company has had four articles published in three journals. From those publications, I have netted zero dollars (when writing fish lit, puns are a must – I don’t know why). Still, there are perks. I have been paid in the form of a promissory email two all-expenses-paid expeditions

for me and one of my closest friends. This, to me, seems like a bargain (I am the contestant at the end of *The Price is Right* who irritates you by selecting The Showcase with the new water-tight hip waiters and ski package rather than the two Corvettes and the six-week trip to Cancun). Cashing in on my earnings will likely cost me and the rest of my family a sizeable sum when it comes to buying gear, bait, and beer, which is to suggest yet again that I should stick with my day job.

And staying the course as a full-time teacher, a part-time writer of academic essays, and an amateurish columnist (in every sense of the phrase) is something I am more than willing to do; however, and you had to see the “however” coming if you were paying attention, as this recent election cycle has made clear on a lower frequency to those academics listening to the code-speaking politicians, there is no guarantee my job and my college will exist five, ten, or fifteen years from now. According to the first half of an article titled, “The academic bubble may burst,” because “average college tuition and fees have risen by 440 percent over the last 25 years,” we are look at the very real possibility that I might soon be standing shoulder-to-shoulder with my recent students, learning as best as I am able how to make a cappuccino. The article points out that “colleges are vulnerable to changing economic conditions,” and puts forward the unpleasant question, “What will the situation be like if the bubble bursts?” Frankly, I do not know (because that is all of the article I have access to here in China), but I do know nonetheless that I don’t want to find out.

Mindful of these foreboding signals, I decided to convert my present sabbatical into an experiment wherein I would approach the six-month stint as though I were writing for my food and earning my keep at the keyboard. Accordingly, I started on August 1 by going backpacking

for two weeks in Idaho. After that, I spent two weeks refereeing fights between my two kids while setting aside timeouts so that I could finish building a screen porch I had begun in early June. Then, September 1 arrived, the kids returned to school, the house fell silent, and it was time to get busy. So, I cleaned the kitchen, mowed the lawn, did the laundry, tried a few pushups, studied myself in the mirror, and headed to the coffee shop.

After punching out almost two entire frequent-customer coffee cards, I had in three weeks produced and submitted two academic essays, one for a journal and the other a collection on teaching with technology. I had also harassed religiously the acquisitions editor at a publishing house where my still-mythical book spends its time in purgatory. All in all, it was a pretty good start to the sabbatical, and I was feeling quite proud of myself, thinking that maybe – if worse comes to worst after the sabbatical – I could muster the requisite will power to be a freelancer.

But then worse did come to worst. While I was waiting in the Minneapolis airport in order to catch my flight to Beijing and from there on to the university that will remain unnamed, I received some unsettling news about my home institution. Things looked shaky, we will say, and leave it at that.

I boarded the plane, turned off the phone (for three weeks), found my seat, and began for the first time to really contemplate what it would be like to have to write for a living. To want to do so is one thing; to have to, I am coming to appreciate, is another altogether.

I spent two days in Beijing with cousins, one of whom is the head of The Asia Foundation, a “think tank”; being a member of a think tank is tantamount to being a freelance independent academic (you cannot possibly go higher than that unless you are “independently

wealthy”). His wife’s cousin happened to be visiting at the same time, and we shared a driver and tour guide for two days. While taking in the Forbidden City (please do not read into that), The Summer Palace, and The Great Wall, she regaled me with stories about her stories; because, wouldn’t you know it, she is a former academic turned professional writer. I’m not making this up. Google “Lenore Look” (and then buy her books, as she is a fabulous writer and even more impressive career counselor). After Beijing it was off to the school that will not be named, which is where I am now, writing this column instead of preparing for a series of three lectures I will give later this afternoon. (For the sake of full disclosure, it should be noted that I don’t get paid a cent for writing this column, nor has the publisher or editor offered to take me fishing.)

At the time I accepted the invitation to serve as a “Visiting Professor of America and Environmental Literatures,” I hesitated, knowing that I would be giving up three weeks of writing in exchange for three of teaching. But I was honored and easily distracted (you should see how clean our kitchen has been; plus, hardly a leaf has laid on the ground longer than an hour this fall before I have been out to rake it up and take it to the compost). So, off I went.

The only non-Asian person on the plane from Beijing to City X, I landed in the world of M.A.S.H., and half expected to find Hawkeye, Radar, Frank and friends at the baggage carousel. I was greeted warmly by my contact person, and we walked the twenty feet or so from the gate (turnstile) to the car there half on the curb. It was covered in dust and appeared to have been left in the garage of a basement building that had been demolished. There were no seatbelts, and we drove back in time from the airport, across a street, and into farmlands full of farmers (not combines), weaving all the while in and out of bike and three-wheeler traffic.

When we arrived at the “new campus” where I would be staying in an “apartment” that is “for your convenience just down the hall from your classroom,” I was struck by what I saw. The campus – with a wide, half-circle entrance and a classic Greek-style promenade, looked imposing and perhaps even impressive from a distance (just precisely as it appeared in the images I had found, with some considerable effort, on line). But up close, the campus and the place where I was staying looked frighteningly similar to an Olympic village sixteen or twenty years after the events, abandoned and abjectly neglected.

The lobby of the building where I am housed – the room that first greeted me – has a rounded glass front (cracked and taped in many places), two high chandeliers covered in dust, and not one piece of furniture. No couches, tables, chairs, pictures, nothing in a space big enough to house five or six racquetball courts. The ceilings is stained, the floors fissured and mottled with missing tiles, and all of the seams in the room filled with thick, brown dust. “Here is our building,” said my guide proudly. “You will be staying here.” I was rendered speechless in the language building.

We made our way up a set of sweeping marble stairs on the front, glass side of the space, walked across an equally vacant balcony area half again as big, to the door to my “apartment.” The outside door is a series of connected, high-security bars, and inside that is a wooden, shed-like door with dead-bolt locks. While the woman was working the clump of keys in and out of four separate locks, I asked if it was safe here: “Oh, yes. Very. This is China. Only the police and military have guns. It is not like Minneapolis.” What a relief.

Once we stepped inside the apartment, I dropped my bag and my jaw. “OK. Here is where you will stay,” said the woman, doing a Vanna White. In front of us was what looked like

the back room of a second-hand shop after a flood. There is a high plaster-white ceiling with, and I'm not exaggerating one bit here, stalactites of salt deposit or something hanging up to a foot long in places. The floor is made up blue squares of tile, cracked in many places, and the walls are white-washed with peeling paint. There is a narrow table next to the door with what looks like a twenty-year-old heating pad for the pot that is upside down next to it; there's a squat Baixue brand fridge from the 1960s, two wooden, reclining chairs facing the wall, a mop in the middle of the floor, a stack of paper towels, a plastic cup for coffee, a boiling pot ("to keep you safe"), two long fluorescent lights pressed against either wall, and a balcony that overlooks the spot where a woman – as I write this – is beating her laundry against the shore. The adjoining bedroom "has its own bathroom" as well as a bed (which is, in truth, a wooden box wrapped in blankets), a velour-orange clam-shaped chair, a TV that doesn't work, a stack of wood (just in case?), and an armoire falling off the wall (and hiding the most essential item of all, a pair of hotel slippers still in the bag). The bathroom is a beauty. There is a hole in the floor for the shower drain, a sink sunk into a Formica counter full of angry dents and chips, and a washroom that is so stiff with dirt I can lift it by one corner. I honestly can't shake the feeling each time I go to the bathroom that I should be carrying a key strapped to a stick or giant wrench. After the tour, my hostess left me to rest and warned me she would return in a few hours in order that we could go to dinner with the dean.

After the door closed with a clang, I sat on the edge of the bed as one might the edge of a bench and thought about my situation: I came here worried that this teaching stint would cut into my writing and discovered an altogether different dilemma. Sure, this situation I found myself in begged to be written about, even if doing so wouldn't result in any money. But beneath this

realization were larger questions related to teaching and learning. As much as I like to fantasize about being a writer, I am a teacher. Will always be one. I am likewise, and forever will be, a student. And when contemplating these things I heard voices echoing in the foyer, the sounds of students coming and going to class. I am, I realized in that instant, quick to dismiss the great gift I have to teach where I do and under the circumstances – as uncertain as they may seem at times; but my problems are not nearly so real and pressing as are those facing these students and their teachers. Further, I am equally inclined to assume as an academic that the grass would be greener on the other side, that the life of a freelance writer – should one make a successful go of it as my friend Lenore has so splendidly done – would be preferable to the one I am living as a full-time teacher, part-time writer. But I am not so sure now.

I continued to work through these contemplations later that evening at what proved to be THE most interesting dining experience I have ever had. Sitting at a round table with nine people from the University – the Dean, the Foreign Diplomat of the University, two male senior professors with crazy hair, an equally senior female on the far side of the spinning top glass top separating us all, and several “junior colleagues,” all of whom were young women both at ease and awkward, smiling often as they watched their alleged superiors try and outdrink one another and their esteemed guest.

To be sure, I had a front-row look at another academic culture. There was in glorious amounts roasted duck head, “very spicy” fish, piles of tentacles, slurping, chunks of pork on bone, lots of yelling, spitting, toasting, random toasting, more slurping, standing and toasting, competitive-toasting-and-drinking-and-bowing toasting), noodles, tofu, and several dishes I could not possibly name or even describe. As it were, I am not a timid eater by any means, but I

don't much go in for the sucking sound (followed by still more spitting) that accompanies your brand-new colleague's best effort to get at the pesky duck eyeball stuck inside the skull.

If I were *Bizarre Foods*' Andrew Zimmern or *No Reservations*' Anthony Bourdain, I would've been in heaven. But I am not, as you can tell from reading this. So, maybe – I considered while standing and toasting and half sitting stupidly before standing and crouching and drinking – I am not cut out for this line of work. It was an insight that would come rushing back to me later in the evening with palpable force, and it was one that was confirmed the next day when I was teaching three sessions in environmental literature to a group of twenty-five Chinese students who had never heard of me, Walden, Leopold, Dillard, Abbey, or even Al Gore.

The class is a three-part, four-day deal wherein the students sit in seats bolted to the floor behind tables equally well-fixed to one spot and wait patiently for me to tell them what to think, something anyone familiar with my work as a writer or teacher knows I am not qualified to do in the least. So, I came at everything slant, to borrow from Dickenson, creating situations and facilitating experiences uncommon for these students. Forty-five minutes into what from their perspective had to seem like madness, we took a ten-minute break; this was followed by a still more unusual class session (even by American standards), and this, too, was followed by the second of two breaks.

Apparently, the word got out that curious things were afoot in the room at the end of the hallway, the one with the American guy, because just before and all during the third session students who hadn't signed up for the class filed into see what all the fuss was about. Soon, it was standing-room only, and we were having a blast.

To be sure, I had a larger audience listening to me then in that cold, spare room with the tables and chairs insisting on normalcy than I have as I write this column. If half as many readers get to the end of this essay as the number of students who sat through to the final bell of the class paying close attention and smiling eagerly, it will shatter all previous records for this column or anything else I have ever written, save the family Christmas letter. It is a statistic that leads to me think I might like to fancy myself from this point forward a “freelance teacher” (I would put a space here, but I’m afraid the title doesn’t seem to merit the same kind of pause as its counterpart; but, oh well – at least it’s accurate).

Now, it’s time to get ready for class.