

ARTISTS AT THEIR DAY-JOBS

By Michael Ventura

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USA Today published a survey recently [May 23, p.1D]. Young people ages 12-to-17 were asked what career they are most seriously considering. The survey tallied their first and second choices: 13% communications; 21%, science; 23%, business; 24%, law; 26%, engineering; 28%, medicine/health -- and 30%, "the arts." Nearly a third are considering a *career* in the arts!

Who's been lying to these children?

What has led them to expect the arts to provide a career? If "career" means "earning one's livelihood," then somebody warn these kids: it ain't so.

I know many dedicated artists. After decades of barely making ends meet, a few finally make art pay -- usually in late middle age. But as a rule, it's most unusual to make a living as an artist.

Poets don't. I've been a poet all my adult life. Spent the better part of four decades, off and on, writing a long poem (200 pages!), *The Walls of Heaven*. The most recent publisher to reject it "could find no fault with its voice or execution" but would not publish a book-length poem by a poet "without a track record." Knowing the business, I was unsurprised. My poem is in the hands of some friends. If that's as far as it gets, I will not have wasted my time. To work all your life to hand something of worth to your friends is a life well spent. I had to write that poem, it was a worthy journey, a journey of lessons bitter and beautiful -- and, as Basho wrote long ago, "The journey itself is the home."

I know some of the finest poets of our era. None earns their keep from the publication of their poetry. Their pay, when they're paid at all, comes from secondary gigs: readings, lectures, conducting workshops. Readings are poetry-in-the-flesh, a performing art, kin to acting when done well. Lectures... beyond what's said, the poet's presence transmits a high that spectators pay for. Workshops are (often, not always) a hustle, supplying tidbits to paying customers. Would-be writers attend workshops for reinforcement. Helps them feel like writers. But if your life doesn't inspire you to write, a workshop won't. Not for long. What you most need to learn about writing is how language resists specific expression, and how to shape it to what you must express, and this is learned through years of writing and in no other way. Close the door of your room behind you, sit down to the task, stick to it -- that's the only workshop that finally counts.

Many poets teach. Their livelihood is teaching, not poetry. If they're good teachers they transmit their love of poetry. If they're bad teachers they teach that even you, poor baby, may be a poet, provided you write as they do. But you can only be a poet if you struggle to find your authentic voice and if you ask nothing of your poetry but to write it as well as you can and to live for the experience of the writing. Some teachers can inspire that but nobody can teach it.

As for earning a living... long after he made his fame as a poet, T.S. Eliot was an editor in a publishing house. Wallace Stevens (who didn't publish poems until his forties) was an insurance executive. William Carlos Williams (the most influential American poet) was a doctor. Hart Crane wrote advertising copy. Edna St. Vincent Millay, the most popular poet of her day, scraped by until her late thirties, when her readings and books began to support her. Nobel-winning poets George Seferis of Greece and Pablo Neruda of Chile were in the diplomatic corps and in politics most of their lives. The young, rightly, are suspect of practicality, but without a practical strain no one survives long as a poet.

Novelists make a living if they write something popular, which usually means confining oneself to a genre -- crime, say, or sci-fi. I know superb novelists who can boast fine reviews from prestigious publications, novelists who've been translated into several languages, but they've rarely earned a year's livelihood from one book -- and novels often take years to write. Famous novelists from Hawthorne to Faulkner have had to supplement their income with other jobs. James Joyce lived off-the-cuff until given a stipend from some arts-loving rich person. D.H. Lawrence was poor all his short life. Willa Cather was a journalist and magazine editor until her

early forties. Henry Miller lived in obscurity, scrounging for money, until his sexually free books were finally published in America when he was seventy. William Faulkner worked in factories, then wrote screenplays. F. Scott Fitzgerald and Jack Kerouac had great success with their early novels but died broke in their forties with most of their books out of print. Me, I've published three novels, none of which paid my keep for a year; I've other novels, years of work, that remain unpublished. That's the gig. I've earned my livelihood as a journalist and screenwriter. I love journalism, but it's a craft -- a craft I respect a great deal -- not an art. Unless you're a writer-director, screenwriting too is a craft; once a producer or director gets their hands on your screenplay they do what they wish; it doesn't belong to the writer and cannot be called a writer's art. Novelists I know work as journalists, teachers, farmers, engineers, yoga instructors, office workers, acupuncturists -- they master something practical but, whatever the day-job, nothing can stop them from writing.

I know marvelous painters and sculptors. (I use the word *sculptors* loosely: they make three-dimensional art). Most earn their keep by teaching; some do commercial art, illustrations, posters, album covers. Their best work rarely sells.

As for film directing -- how many who go to film school become directors? A handful. I don't know what most of those film students do after graduation, but only about 300 American directors a year get to make a movie; many of those films only screen at festivals. (In TV, writer-director-producers like Joss Whedon, Chris Carter, and J. Michael Straczynski, make art -- but nothing is more rare, and even these types rarely get to do more than one TV series.)

It's worse for playwrights and theater directors. Very few mount a stage production often or for long, and for most it's a labor of love. The best theater today is performed in mid-size and small cities all across the country, and almost everyone involved has a day-job.

The performing arts fare somewhat better. Dancers who get regular work can pay the rent but can rarely buy a house. They're like baseball players: not many perform well after the age of 35, and what will you do then? Most musicians and singers last only as long as their niche is in vogue. For example: At a lunch counter in Page, Arizona, the guy on the adjacent seat struck up a conversation. Where was I from? Los Angeles, at the time. He'd lived in L.A., he'd been a drummer, their band had a hit, had I heard of it, *I Fought the Law*? One of the biggest hits of its year. Now he owns a boat-repair shop in Page. Such stories are legion.

As for actors... there's art and there's shtick. Most actors who make a living begin with art and end with shtick: a repertoire of performance-ticks that please an audience but have no more to do with self-expression than toilet paper. Or their story goes like this: When I lived in West Hollywood, in my apartment building resided an interesting actress who had a good role on *Buffy*. In the second season they killed her off. Two years later, I saw her in a commercial. I haven't seen her since. That's show business. Any given decade, the number of actors who work consistently at roles worth playing wouldn't fill the roster of a baseball team. Maybe two baseball teams.

On the other hand, I know a guy in Midland, Texas, who's devoted to local theater. Selflessly and without hope of profit, he acts, produces, directs. He works more than most actors I knew in L.A. Daytime, he's a business man. Nighttime, in the theater, he's the real deal.

Nor has any artist the right to whine. Life is tough for everyone, and no one forced us to become artists. If the love of it isn't finally enough, one must look not to the world but to the quality of one's love.

Art is composed of two elements: love and compulsion. The love of your art, and the compulsion to do it. Which is why my words won't discourage any true artist. If you're the real deal, you'll do it no matter what. That Greek poet I mentioned, Seferis, said: "We do not speak of the great or minor artist, but of who keeps art alive." So, kid, take the leap, devote your life to keeping art alive. You have my word: your wages will be trouble that's worth getting into and beauty that money can't buy. Murray Kempton said it: "The only argument against [this] road is its risks, and you affront the young -- or ought to -- when you advise them against risks."

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