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The business end of dreaming

You have to search out and live the truth for yourself. This story explores the conundrum of creating a livelihood around your heart's desire – and achieving work/life balance.

A growing number of people seriously consider going into business for themselves today. This is especially true of people who believe they have something positive to offer the world. The desire to make a living through your own gifts and at the same time to foster the well-being of others can be very strong.

You may have learned massage or energy healing, hypnotherapy or stress management. You may have developed a training course or workshop that you wish to share with others. You may have created a product that you wish to sell – juices, oils, organic vegetables. Or discovered a product you wish to distribute.

How does the dream happen? In many cases, it doesn't. You think about it and decide that it is unrealistic, and you go back to the office where you've been for six years, ready for another six or more years. Well, perhaps you are wise. Something like 80% of small businesses fail in the first 12 months. You have avoided being one of them.

You have also avoided being one of the success-with-stress stories. Like Sarah, who loved making pies, and who went into business with her own pie shop. Three years later she was exhausted, getting up every day at three in the morning to bake pies, being in the shop all day, and dealing with all the business details at night before falling into bed so she could get up at three in the morning to do it all again – and she had got to the point of hating pies.

But the desire is strong. You believe in the value of vegetarianism, and you want to find a way to educate and show people how it's possible to live a better life this way (Linda McCartney's story). You also believe that it ought to be possible for you to make your livelihood doing something that you believe in.

In the wake of "The Secret", the belief in our ability to realise possibilities has become extremely popular. The book and movie proclaimed the law of attraction. Being clear and persistent in articulating and affirming a desired outcome will bring about that outcome – the universe is structured this way. And those who are not successful? Perhaps they lack that clarity or that persistence.

But you have to search out and live the truth for yourself. So, here is a series of stories to consider, about the conundrum of creating a livelihood around our heart's desire.

Story 1: Oriah Mountain Dreamer

You have probably heard of “The Invitation”, Oriah Mountain Dreamer’s challenging prose poem, or manifesto. This is no message for the faint-hearted. There are many profound truths in this short work, but the message applied to your going into business successfully could be summed up as “Perhaps God doesn’t care whether or not you get to drive a red Ferrari”.

There is a firm distinction in “The Invitation” between inner truth and outward appearance – the Taoist distinction. The first message to learn about going into business is about knowing where you seek your validation from. Is it from the inside, knowing that you have done something well, or something worthwhile, or is it from outside, the approval of others, money, status?

If you have a need to acquire enough money to buy the red Ferrari, then this will shape the way you work on your business. It’s not wrong, and inner and outer success can most certainly coexist. But if you fail to make the distinction, and fail to see what is really driving you, it may create problems for you along the way. For a start, you need to clarify your values and ethics upfront, because they bear upon every business decision you make.

Story 2: Saving Sarah

The issue that probably concerns people the most about going into business is how to avoid becoming like Sarah above. The shiny dream could so easily turn into a nightmare of working endless hours, in an atmosphere of insecurity, and only just making ends meet. People working as employees often complain about work/life balance, but people working for themselves often treat themselves much worse than an employer would.

The trap, of course, is that we say we are only doing this until – until the business gets on its feet, until we reach that milestone, until.... The irony is that this is a key reason why people go into business for themselves in the first place, to have flexibility and control over how they work. Read some literature on work/life balance and stress, and keep in mind the symptoms.

Yes, it is true, you can work long hours for short periods of time, and this can be exhilarating if you are working to complete a project, such as creating your own website. A healthy work/life balance does not always mean stopping work at 5pm. But don’t delude yourself that all is well when you are not cooking and eating regular meals, seeing the sunshine, or exercising and sleeping regularly.

Sarah’s story was told by Michael Gerber, author of “The E-myth”. His central idea is that running a business and exercising an area of expertise are two different things. New entrepreneurs get overrun because they think that running a business is just a minor extension of being an expert (trainer, consultant, masseur, healer).

Reading Michael Gerber’s book is essential reading for anyone who wants to be in business for themselves. When you worked for an employer, the employer organised the work, ran the accounts, costed work or products, collected money, touted for work or advertised, developed new products or services, resolved employee issues, dealt with government agencies (taxation, licences, councils), suppliers and customers, and managed property and equipment.

Now you are going to do all that. And do whatever it is your business is supposed to deliver for customers or clients. Unless you have systems, processes and resources for fulfilling all of these

aspects of your business, then your business won't happen, or at least, not for very long before you burn out.

Story 3: Creating success

The work/life balance issue may turn out to be the key issue for people wanting to go into business for themselves. If you can discover the secret of this, success is then possible. Getting clear about what the dream is is essential. But getting clear does not make the dream instantly true. M.C. Richards, a Steiner teacher, said that it is a kind of conceit that humans have, that once we are clear about an idea or a truth, we expect the whole world to instantly realise it too. Then we get disappointed or disgusted with the world when it doesn't happen.

The reality is that we have to bring our idea to reality patiently. It is a measure of our faith in our idea, to persist until it is established. Jane Austen is a good example. She had the idea of being a novelist, and pursued this idea faithfully. She was not an overnight success and, indeed, in her lifetime she was only ever a modest success. The value of her work has only been richly appreciated in the last 50 years.

Story 4: The soul of your business

Michael Gerber has another story. It is told by the manager of a hotel. On the day he was hired, the owner sat him down and explained what he was trying to do in the hotel. As the manager explains it, "It wasn't just that he was serious, it was the kind of seriousness he had. It was as if the hotel wasn't just a hotel, it was an expression of who he was, and what he believed in. The hotel expressed those beliefs on a day-to-day basis. The owner said, 'The work you do becomes you. How you do your work becomes a mirror of how you are inside.'"

This is a constructive way to look at your business. It is a form of flesh, into which you breathe life. There is an idea (an ideal) behind the work which is more important than the work itself. Your every action either feeds that idea or reduces it to a lower kind of reality.

Story 5: Bringing yourself to work

Another book which is very valuable for anyone thinking of going into business is Lynne Frank's "The Seed Handbook". It is about the "feminine way to create business". The meaning? Our culture has carried the idea that success in business is about (male) aggression. Lynne emphasises the nurturing aspect of business – sowing seeds, cultivating gardens. She talks a lot about the self that you bring to the business enterprise.

In fact, it is page 170 before she talks about the mission of the business. Prior to that she talks at length about personal disciplines and vision. She also talks about community, the value of connecting with other people on the journey – how can you find mutual support, and how can you work comfortably with others?

Lynne was a friend of the late Anita Roddick. What they have in common is a belief that it is possible to establish a business that is both ethical and successful. It is important to consciously adhere to this belief. Perhaps the greatest enemy of people seeking to build a new enterprise is the failure of this belief. Then either the business fails, or it succeeds for all the wrong reasons.

Story 6: Growing the business, growing the self

Starting a business can be a bit like graduating from university and starting a career. You can fall into the trap of thinking that learning is over, and now your task is simply to apply your expertise in order to make a living. But if you do last, you will have been learning. You will learn about all the aspects of

business that Michael Gerber talks about, but you will also keep learning about your area of expertise.

You will also keep learning spiritually, and this is the slowest learning of all. If we pay attention, we will see what it is that experience is teaching us. A good book for contemplation of the purpose of our work – whether we are employees or our own masters – is Lewis Richmond’s *Work as a Spiritual Practice*. The sub-title is: “how to bring depth and meaning to the work you do”.

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This article was published in Living Now’s magazine *Dare to Dream*, Issue 5, 2008.