The Freelancer

Abstract

The asphalt streets of Los Angeles were steamy hot and the air polluted thick with smog when I was a kid. I escaped through television shows, writers like Ernest Hemingway, and vintage issues of Life and National Geographic magazines. This lethal combination became the impetus for a wanderlust life filled with dreams of photographing the world. I have yet to circumnavigate the globe, but in this paper I discuss the reality of taking on an existence of freelance photography to get me there.
Dreaming 1

I was walking the cold cobblestones of Hemingway’s Paris the other day. My footsteps echoed against the bleak black and white buildings. A thin layer of fog lingered lightly, embracing everything. Paris was also the beautiful steamy and pulsating city of Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin. The Eiffel Tower loomed high and large like some sort of dark phallus. The Seine slowly slithered like a silvery serpent against its banks. Chic Parisians were huddled in clusters as they effortlessly spouted their romantic language. Each person was wearing monotone fashion, talking with a cigarette crookedly in their mouth. I was in awe of its postcard beauty and surprised that it was the black and white Paris I had always admired in old stained copies of Life Magazine. There was even the traditional black beret atop the traditional mime, wearing a black and white striped shirt and black pants. He was performing at the side of the park where I was standing. There was also a gypsy type of person, playing the accordion as a chained monkey collected money in his overturned cap from tourists and children alike. The mime approached me, and reached behind my ear to produce the only item with color: Red roses. As I stared in wonderment he said “here for you” in crisp clear English. “But you’re not supposed to…” I began. At that point, I woke up. The Paris of my dreams was in my dreams. I just stared up at the blank white ceiling in my room and smiled as I relived the entire event in my mind. The Paris that I visited was shaped and formed by the countless old photographs and stories I read as a child. At that moment, I really understood what Hemingway meant by Paris being a “movable feast.” Paris gets under a person’s nails and seeps into their pores. Paris can be inhaled deep and lustfully savored by the billions of wet taste buds in a mouth. It is a city that can be absorbed into one’s DNA and thus become a part of the person anywhere they move. It seems that this is true, even if Paris is just a fragmented memory of many people’s views and ideas; because – funny thing – I’ve never been to Paris. That dream I had was built from writers and their words, but, most importantly, it was manifested from photographs.

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Escaping

The apartments weren’t too bad; perhaps the neighborhoods were. The streets were filled with working-class immigrants and the usual graffiti decorating big, empty walls. It didn’t matter much to a kid like her, a dreamer. The apartments became jungle trees and their inhabitants were monkeys, panthers, and other tree dwelling animals. However, some buildings were really old and had left over characteristics from another era. Those were the structures that made her small mouth open with awe and ignited her thoughts. She pictured those buildings in their heyday, filled with artists, movie stars, and writers. And every single person dressed so fashionably! She saw this not because of her imagination, but because these apartments looked just like the ones she had seen in the photos from issues of Life and National Geographic magazines. Her mother had, curiously, gotten it into her mind that, somehow, issues of these renowned magazines would be a benefit to her children. Anytime she found a discarded or unwanted Life or National Geographic, she would bring it home for someone to enjoy. In one of the apartments they lived in, there was a small walk-in closet in the room that the girl shared with her sister. The skinny little girl would grab her giant sized clown, just as skinny as she, along with a few magazines. She would drag the bunch and hide in her closet. Sitting on the bare wooden floor with her companion by her side she would visually feast on photographs of cosmopolitan cities, African landscapes, and beasts both wild and tame. It was this that had her looking and comparing what she saw with what she had seen. But the thing is, it wasn’t that she was a day dreamer like most of her teachers thought; she was a traveler. It was as if she was already an escape artist from her young life.

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Recollecting

I took a photography course in high school because I still had that love for photography. Not having my own camera and the complications of the tool quickly defeated my attempts at the art. It was at one of the many part time jobs that I had where I became close friends with a girl whose brother was an amateur photographer. He earned money by entering and winning photography contests. It was the first time I had actually met someone whose photography took my breath away. I didn’t know anything about “the photographer’s eye” at the time, but I did know that the way he looked at things through was not average. He made a simple scene come to life with his artistry. His love for the craft, as well as his talent, began to rub off on me. I found myself becoming aware of the lack of my photographic skills, but instead of feeling discouraged, I began improving them. Before I dared to shoot anything I started noticing other photographers and was keenly interested in how they shot. When I was younger, I was too young and too involved in the image captured to understand that what I was viewing had anything to do with a particular person. Before I met my friend’s brother, I didn’t notice the names of photographers; however, after I met him, I could easily jot down names of the famous photographers of the moment. The names that come through my hazy mind that inspired me in the beginning are Man Ray, Peter Beard, and Bruce Weber. I can undoubtedly say that those three artists left an impression on me with their work.
Man Ray was an artist as well as a photographer. He was a surrealist, and photographed in black and white. He aspired to free the creative mind by mixing images that one might not necessarily think went together. I remember skipping class and going to a Man Ray exhibit in downtown L.A. and thinking how profound his work was. One of his most famous photographs depicts a woman’s back. It’s very simple. Her back is straight and then curves at the hips. It’s very womanly. On her sides, however, Man Ray had painted curvy squiggles somewhat like the open spaces of an instrument. By adding these shapes on the lower back Man Ray transformed a back into an instrument, a violin. It was something so basic, but at the same time quite astonishing, for me.

Peter Beard is known as an artist as well, but it was his whole persona that drew me to him. He loved Africa, and captured its people and beasts. His shots are raw, beautiful, and somewhat stylish. The whole Serengeti with its wild inhabitants was a landscape. His vision not only fed me visually but stirred my wanderlust. Not only was Peter Beard a beautiful man, who I enjoyed gazing at, but his artistic vision really stood out to me. He used his photos to create these incredible mixed media journals. He used anything that appealed to him in his journals, and that includes his own blood as paint. I saw an exhibit of his work in a little privately owned gallery. I remember not wanting to leave the place. I just wanted to study every piece exhibited and slip into his extraordinary world.
Lastly, there is fashion photographer Bruce Weber. His work consists mostly of black & white portraits. Although he is a bit commercial, his photos are powerful and portray a quiet beauty. There is an underlying tone to his images that suggest there is a deeper story behind each face and body. Weber’s photos are like wordless stories. All three of these photographers are famous, and have worked with the human form as well as doing work in the fashion industry, but the reason they stand above for me is because they give the viewer a photo that begs to be read. They give their audience a story.

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Doing

I have never been attracted to the big, professional, expensive, and bulky equipment of photography. I have always preferred small and slick cameras. My first camera was an Olympus point and shoot. I had stayed a true Olympus fan by always upgrading my Olympus year after year with whatever their current camera of choice was. One day, however, I got myself an iPhone. I soon found that the iPhone camera was quite good, and my choice of camera dramatically changed. My initial reason for obtaining an iPhone was completely superficial; I wanted to keep up with what was trending in the world. It was great! I no longer had to carry two items, such as a phone and a camera. The best thing about the iPhone is that I can quickly reach into my pocket and grab my phone if I need to take a shot. With every version upgrade of the iPhone that comes out the camera’s quality gets better. Apple keeps improving on the pixel ratio and sharpness of its phone’s ability. Apple’s technological advancements in its camera have also included the ability to take panoramic photos and a built in timer for selfies. I keep upgrading my phone to obtain the best available phone camera
possible, which I believe is the iPhone. Not only did I become a fan of the iPhone as a phone but I have fallen in love with the ease of its camera use as well as its easy accessibility.

There are also companies that have sprung up from the growth in phone cameras such as the iPhone. Companies like Watershot, Olloclip, and Artifact Uprising provide accessories as well as services to meet the needs of a digital photographer. My underwater case is made by Watershot and can descend to 195 feet into the ocean’s depths. I take both macro and fisheye shots with a lens clip that fits snugly over my phone made by Olloclip, and I find that Artifact Uprising develops exceptionally good quality iPhone photos that I feel comfortable selling. There are also other tools to help phone photographers, such as phone stands, timers, special flashes, and backdrops. Along with the photographic aids, there are countless other applications that can take a phone photograph to a higher level. The applications provide various filters and photo effects that would have required a lot of a dark room use in the past. Along with the applications, there are also photography social media sites that can be accessed with a high-end mobile phone. The popular sites for photographers are Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, and countless others. The social media sites are helpful in promoting one’s work as well as networking. When I began sharing my photos online, it was on Facebook. Soon, I had friends wanting to buy photos, and some who kept telling me to make calendars that they could purchase. I then began a Tumblr account (moreso as a photography blog), and right after that, I started an Instagram account; that’s when things really changed for me as a photographer.
Now, Instagram is a totally different type of application than I have ever used. It is a social media application that you download to your phone. It began as an iPhone-only app, but it now has a minimal-use web interface and has been made available to other mobile phone manufacturers. It is also user friendly on Apple iPods. It is a visual delight for both professional and amateur photographers. Users can share photographs that they have taken or that they like and share them with anyone in the world. I began posting my own photos under the name @monkm, and followed both professional photographers and amateurs whose pictures I liked. It is a worldwide app, so a really popular person could have thousands of followers. The application is somewhat like a networking tool because you are showcasing your work. It’s a thrill to have real time comments of support regarding your work, especially from professional photographers that have an enormous amount of followers. Although I had taken a previous photography course, I did not retain much of what was taught to me. The more I began using Instagram and looking at so many different photographs day after day, the more I began to really “see” things. I saw how shadows and light mingle together. I took notice of how reflections appeared on various different types of surfaces. I then began to understand that not every subject had to be centered. It was profound. It seemed like I was having a rebirth of my sight. Instagram also taught me about “street photography,”
“candid photography,” and how to look for and take creative angles. Soon, I found myself going on photo walks with other photographers, and a new word popped into my language: “iPhoneography.” iPhoneography is what I do, taking and editing photos with only an iPhone and its iOS system. This free, tiny application has not only changed how I see things, but has also opened a worldwide community for me to network my product in.

My photography skills have definitely improved since I joined Instagram. Along with fine-tuning my eye I have had my work showcased online in The Wall Street Journal, CNN’s Instagram feed, and other very popular Instagrammers’ feeds. I have also had people contact me on Instagram requesting to buy some of my photos, which opened up the prospect of actual sales. It was because I was getting requests from people on Facebook and Instagram that I began selling my photography. I have sold some work through craft fairs, garage sales, and, at one point, sold postcards through a local retail store in Kailua. I am currently working on starting my Etsy store, where I will sell greeting cards and photos of various size on mediums like premium photo paper, canvas, metal, and wood. I mainly shoot landscape and seascape shots, but I am currently trying to move into portrait photography. I have done commissioned work for friends and family on portraiture, but I am anxious to get professional print work.
At the moment, what sells for me are beautiful pictures of nature. People online usually love the palm trees, clear blue ocean, and shots of crashing waves. I can see how, to someone living elsewhere in the world, these types of pictures could seem so exotic, and that owning such a photo might give them a small pleasure. It is incredibly easy to find tropical photos with waves crashing; however, many of those shots look very similar. I believe this is where a good eye comes in handy, because you want your photography to stand out from the masses. I feel that my work has an original look that helps it stand out from the multitude. If I didn’t feel this way then I shouldn’t be in this type of work because this is a very competitive field. In order to get work and be able to make money, my product needs to be of quality as well as being unique. This world is filled with visual stimuli, so a photographer has to be able to move his or her audience; a photo should be able to convey some sort of message without uttering a word. I suppose one can say it works at a subconscious level and that the photographer should be able to capture that. Another thing that helps with photography is constant practice and constantly shooting. It’s only with practice that a photographer can be prepared for many situations.
Analyzing

Dear Reader, the last paragraph that I just wrote reminds me of what we learned in my Worklife Writing class. The class was assigned to read different chapters of Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of the Self in Every Day Life*. Although what was written had to do more with a common place of work, such as at a company, I feel that it applies to a freelance photographer, or any person in freelance work. Although the freelancer is a company of one, the freelancer has to have “an audience” and the freelancer has to “perform” for the intended audience. Goffman writes that “when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society” (23) (When networking, the freelance photographer is always performing to get the job or a job. Thus, the freelancer must always present him or herself in as positive a light as possible. Performing for the intended audience, the freelancer has to know what product or type of photography his audience is looking for. If the freelance photographer is versatile, then he or she has different audiences. For example, I have several audiences for my work: The people that do not live in Hawaii but love island scenes, the islander that sees something different in my tropical shots, and the person who wants their portrait taken by me. I have to be able to perform by speaking to them. I also need to confidently convey that I know what they would like. Goffman also states that “If an individual is to give expression to ideal standards during his performance, then he will have to forgo or conceal action which is inconsistent with these standards.” (26) What that statement
means is that a freelancer must not relate anything about car troubles or home issues that might be occurring. The freelance worker must convey confidence in their craft as well as in his or her abilities to get the product to the intended audience. Like Shakespeare so poetically wrote, “All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts.”

Interviewing

Since I am new to freelance photography, I asked three different professional photographer friends that I met through Instagram about their Freelance photography. Two of these individuals, Greg Gerla (@leggomygreggo on Instagram) and Pete Halvorsen (@petehalvorsen), are currently freelance photographers. The third photographer, Klint, wishes to remain anonymous. He used to freelance, but currently does photography as a hobby. It’s interesting how the three photographers have had somewhat of the same experiences regarding their work. I have also included two graphs after a couple of the questions to compare against the reality of the photographers’ lives.

How long have you been interested in photography?

GREG I’ve been interested in photography since I was a young kid around 10 years old. My first camera was a Kodak Instamatic that used 110 film.
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KLINT Since high school when my dad got me a Nikon f2, used.
PETE 20 years.

Have you taken any photography classes?
GREG Yes, I took photography courses in High School, and then received a Diploma in Photographic Arts after a four year program at the Alberta College of Art & Design in Calgary, Alberta.
KLINT One. Maybe two in college.
PETE Never!

How long have you been a professional photographer?
GREG I’ve been shooting professionally since 1991, so that is 23 years. Yikes.
KLINT I was a pro for 18 months.
PETE 5 years.

Do you have your own studio?
GREG Yes. At the moment I share a studio with 3 other photographers.
KLINT I did. When I was 25 and recently diagnosed with MS (weeks apart).
PETE Yes, my garage doubles as a studio.

Do you do a lot of freelance work?
GREG All of my work is freelance.
KLINT Never did.
PETE Majority of my work is freelance.

Is networking important for you?
GREG Networking is one of the most important ingredients for a successful practice.
KLINT It would be, now, but back then I didn't know that.
PETE Network is how I get 80% of my work. Work gets work, but network gets you more work.

How do you network?
GREG Social media. I am also a member of CAPIC (The Canadian Association of Professional Image Creators). I consistently meet with Advertising Agencies, Creative Directors, and Art Directors to show them my portfolio.
PETE Online, through commenting on photos, and in person through parties and functions. Also, I’ve found that meeting others onset during jobs is a great way to continue that networking.

Do you advertise, and if so, how?
GREG I send out direct mail promo pieces.
PETE The only advertising I do is having a website.

Do you have set hours for your photography, or is it random?
GREG It’s very random.
PETE Very random, sometimes it’s a week of work. Sometimes it’s a 1 hour stock photo-shoot.

Do you make a living from your photography? (If not, do you have another job as well?)
GREG I make most of my income from photography. I also teach seasonally in the photo dept. at the Alberta College of Art & Design.
KLINT I didn't have another job, but [I] should have.
PETE Photography is my job. I've also been paid as a “consultant” to some companies to teach them how to curate their Instagram feeds.

Source: United States; Department of Labor; Bureau of Labor Statistics; Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections; Occupational Outlook
According to the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, freelance photographers do not often have set work hours. They are usually flexible. The work environment varies greatly for photographers. They either work in a studio or travel to job sites. They can also be employed in labs and use microscopes to aid in photography. There are also certain classes of photographers that are in demand only at certain times of the season. For example, wedding photographers are typically sought during the spring and summer seasons. The U.S Bureau of Labor also states that the median wage for photographers was $13.70, with the highest paid photographers getting paid $32.21. “Photographers in the District of Columbia earned the highest hourly median wage, earning $33.15 in May 2012”

How costly is photography?

GREG It’s very costly. The equipment is a big investment, especially with the introduction of digital photography. The equipment becomes outdated very rapidly.


PETE Cheaper than it was with film, but expensive because of all the gadgets we now need/want for documenting daily life.

How has photography changed for you since the invention of the iPhone, or rather, since the popularization of digital photography?

GREG It has changed dramatically. Technology to make good images is now at everyone’s fingertips. There are exponentially more ‘photographers’ out there. As a result, with a glut of imagery, the value of photography has dropped dramatically. It’s much more difficult to earn a living. However, discerning clients realize that they still require someone with a good eye and a creative mind. Ansel Adams said, “Owning a camera doesn’t make you a photographer, it makes you a camera owner.”

KLINT Brought me back. I hadn't photographed for about 20 years until the iPhone.
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PETE It’s made me more keen to how special daily life is and how easily you can capture those moments without having to “create” the scene… it’s already there in front of you.

With all the advancement in equipment for phone photographers, do you think that it would be possible to be a “professional phone photographer”?

GREG Absolutely… as long as one uses their creative skill. It’s what is behind your eye that’s important, not what’s in front of your eye.

KLINT Yes.

PETE Absolutely, but I think it would be limiting as to someone’s price point, fee wise, because they would only be known as a “phone” photographer. There is still a stigma because everyone has access to a phone camera that they aren’t worth as much.

Do you think equipment matters as a photographer, or is it better to have a good eye?

GREG The gear is probably the least important part. Having a good eye, a creative mind, and an inquisitive heart are required. With those, you can create a wonderful image with any camera.

KLINT Good eye.

PETE You can always teach the “numbers” in photography… you can’t teach the eye.

Are professional photographers still needed even though it seems as if everyone can now take a picture?

GREG I believe so. I keep repeating myself, but creative vision is the key ingredient that you can’t purchase at a camera store.

KLINT Always. People still need pro writers even though everyone has a word processor and a printer.

PETE I hope so! Yes, totally, but the landscape has changed in that the photographer now has to be a more complete story teller. It doesn’t just stop at pushing the button.

What do you think of all these photography social media sites for photography, such as Instagram?

GREG I love them. Instagram is a great deal of fun. It allows me to express myself photographically, but in a different way. Plus, I love seeing what other people create. I think it helps me to be better at what I do.
PETE Love them all. They’ve changed my life and my job.

Is photography a competitive field?
GREG It’s SO competitive! But I don’t think that’s a bad thing… it forces you to be on your toes! Competition can be a healthy influence that encourages and challenges you to improve your skills.
KLINT Very.
PETE I’ve heard it is. I try not to look at my peers as competitors, but as collaborators. I often refer others for jobs that I feel I’m not suited for.

How do you see photography evolving in the future? Will it still be a growing art?
PETE Art will always find a way.
KLINT Always growing.

Where has photography taken you as a person and in your travels?
GREG This has been the greatest gift from what I do. I have met so many amazing people and seen so many amazing places because of what I do. Everywhere from Moscow to the Arctic Circle. Celebrities to the homeless. It has shown me what an amazing place we live in, and how everyone can teach me something about myself. I never tire of this, and I’m so grateful for it.
PETE Literally all over the world. Personally, it’s allowed me to grow (and keep growing) into a more understanding person.

What advice can you give to anyone interested in becoming a professional photographer?
KLINT Always be shooting.
PETE Don’t wait. Start shooting right now, today. Start shooting and sharing – the more you shoot, the more you’ll grow. Try to copy people’s styles you really love, [and] you will start to find your own style and make it your own.

The U.S Labor Department also estimates that photography will only grow 4% from 2012 to 2022. Its slow growth is due to the many amateur photographers now out in the world, and that is due to the increasingly affordability of digital equipment. They do suggest that there will still be a demand for seasonal as well as portrait photographers, and companies will still need to hire freelance photographers for jobs.

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Dreaming 2

It wasn’t until many years and thousands of photographs after that that I found myself on the beach with a camera in hand. My eye lashes were heavy with sleep and my mouth kept yawning. At first, I saw only a dim glow on the horizon. Slowly, the glow blurred into a ball and ascended above the water. The higher it rose, the more it changed; rays began bursting, stretching out as if they, too, had just woken up. There was so much light and color exploding over all the shadows, and warmth quickly ensued. I was awake now. I was looking through my phone and clicking the button, trying in my feeble human way to capture something incredibly magical and maybe
miraculous. I have captured countless of sunrises, and they are each different. I might not be able to remember everyone that I have met through the years, but when I look at my sunrise photos, I can remember what was special about that moment. It was these first inklings of recognition for my photography that encouraged me not only to keep shooting but also to expand my vision of where to shoot.

I woke up in an old hotel in Delhi. I quickly dressed and rushed to meet my friends and professor. I wanted to go watch the sunrise with them. Jet lag and the time difference confused me, and I wasn’t quite sure what direction was east. I was too late. The sun had already risen. Disappointed, I woke up again, this time in real life. All the rest of that day, I had a strong urge to photograph the sunrise in India. It became the catalyst that eventually got me to India that summer. It was dark; it had to be 4:30, maybe 5 AM. It was dark and cool, not a cold coolness, but like a comfortable breeze on a hot summer day type of cool. We walked fast in the darkness. Fast from the excitement, fast to be somewhere, and fast from fear of the strange outlines in the dark. The outlines morphed into concrete cows and bulls with long lethal horns. We needed to catch a rickshaw a few roads away in order to get to our somewhere. The somewhere we needed to be was the river. We wanted to watch the sun rise. Unlike sunsets, most sunrises have few viewers. The comforts of a bed or drugged-like sleep are strong seducers. There are numerous witnesses to the rising sun at the Ganges River, however. Many are bare and bathing at the river’s edge, while others are chanting or praying and giving offers of faith. Everyone stares around the river. They stare at the sun. We sit on a boat and stare at them and their ancient ways as we inhale the stench of smoldering corpses. Soon, we too become transfixed at the beautiful orange ball of light. It reminds me of a movie. It was a small part in the movie, when all the angels on Earth would stop as the sun rose or set. As the angels watched, they would hear this wonderful music, and they would become witnesses to something wonderful. But that was a movie. This is real life, and I’m not an angel. The pollution in the atmosphere creates a filter for the sun, so it stays a big orb. Flocks of egrets fly overhead, and a golden, burning line of reflection shimmers over the still-polluted sacred water. At that moment I become a witness to something wonderful, right there, rising, and I and all the
others begin to click away. It wasn’t the Delhi sunrise that I had dreamt about. I don’t think you can dream up a sunrise like that. However, my love for photography was the impetus that got me to India and took me to Bali. It has provided me with a slight income at the moment, and I can only dream about how else it will steer the course of my life.
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