
HOW TO FEED A STARVING ARTIST

A FINANCIAL FIELD GUIDE FOR CREATIVES,
SOLOPRENEURS, AND OTHER ANARCHISTS

DAVID DUCHEMIN, AUTHOR OF A BEAUTIFUL ANARCHY

HOW TO FEED A STARVING ARTIST
*A Financial Field Guide for Creatives,
Solopreneurs, & Other Anarchists*

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CHAPTER 1

HARD BEGINNINGS

This is a book about money, written by a guy who's learned the hard way while making a living as a creative person his entire adult life, and written for other creative people who would rather eat glass than talk about money, but have come to the startling realization that they and their families have a troublesome need to eat and pay bills, never mind the opportunities in life they'd like to pursue. But that's too long for a subtitle. Mostly this is a book about freedom. Where my first book on this theme, *A Beautiful Anarchy, When the Life Creative Becomes the Life Created*, talks about freedom in a much larger

context, this book is about financial freedom, or more specifically, it is a conversation about ideas that must be discussed and considered in order to get our finances to the place where freedom results.

Because I know of no other way to do it, I'm going to be painfully vulnerable (the vulnerability will be painful for me, but you will probably suffer more from the number of words it takes me to perform that simple task). So the first thing you need to know is how ambivalent I am about writing this book. I'm strongly pulled between (a) my desire not to write it because it's difficult to talk about this stuff, let alone to do so with vulnerability, and (b) my knowledge that not talking about it has made it a topic of fear and shame, and those two pressures alone are probably more responsible than anything else for where many of us are (or have been) with money. Fear and shame are not conducive to a spirit of inquiry. More often than not they just make us want to put our heads in the sand and hope it just all goes away. It doesn't. Many of us have tried, and when we finally pull our heads out of the sand (or creditors do that for us), we find the situation has become intolerably worse. Enough already.

The other reason I'm reluctant to write this book is because it's yet another voice in a choir filled with other voices talking about money, many of whom (not all) speak loud about accomplishments, charge a lot of money to get in on the knowledge,

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making the rich guy richer and the ones who so need the information even poorer than they were. It makes me want to take a shower. No one should work for free as we all have bills to pay, but the slick salesman with the million-dollar smile and the hundred-dollar haircut makes me feel kind of slimy. Fortunately for you, due to the lack of real effort needed, my haircuts cost much less than that. Still, it's hard to talk about the money stuff without feeling like apologizing. My hope is that this sensitivity has kept me on track, and helped me create a book that's honest and helpful without so much as a whiff of snake oil. I won't try to sell you a thing. You've bought the book, and that's enough. Perhaps it will help if I tell you right now that I have no illusions about being an expert on these matters. In fact, I think that's one of the things that stands in the way of so many people getting their finances in order: the belief that, beyond spending, knowledge about money is complicated and requires you be an expert—or the willingness to become one—in order to make sense of it. It does not. It requires a little humility to acknowledge that there's much we don't know, and then the willingness to consult and learn from those who do. I'm not an expert, just one creative who finally got his finances together, is doing what he loves with his life, and wants to help others do the same.

I have made my living as a creative person since leaving college almost 20 years ago. I spent 12 years as a comedian, then transitioned to a career in photography, eventually

becoming a writer as well. I have learned my lessons about money the hard way while pursuing my art. I can't imagine another life so gratifying—nor as challenging—as what I do right now. I spend much of the year travelling the world, making photographs, teaching, writing my books in small Italian coffee shops or African safari tents. Most days I feel like the luckiest guy in the world, but know that this did not come easily. I was born into a distinctly middle class military family. Post divorce, my mother spent several years struggling to get by and keep her son healthy, and happy, and as unaware of our circumstances as she could. I wore a lot of hand-me-downs, and I am no worse for wear: I was a kid, what did I know? But we didn't talk a lot about money, and when we did, it never stuck. I now know that I would have to learn those lessons myself, the hard way.

My financial problems did not begin for a lack of income. I was always employed or self-employed in some way all the way through high school. I was good at working hard; I was not good at saving my money, nor at living within my means. I'll discuss this later when it's relevant, but for now it's enough to know that I dug my own hole, never really aware of the tools I needed to dig myself out, nor did I know they were so close at hand. Getting older has a way of compounding those mistakes, much like the interest I could have been earning had I paid any attention and saved my money. Anything I've learned (and am passing along to you), came honestly. If I can recover, so can

you. If I can thrive, so can you. And that brings up a sermon that I need to get out now or I'm going to explode.

Nothing in this book works. They are just words. And this is not Harry Potter where the words themselves will do a damn thing. They won't. There are no magic spells. Nothing in this book is easy. If you're reading this now and haven't bought the book, and you're hoping for a get-rich-quick book, the best money you'll make today is to put this book down. You just made \$10. Because money saved is money earned. I repeat, nothing in this book works. Unless you do. I've read a lot of books about money in my desire to learn everything I could about it. Some books profess to tell secrets. There are none. It's actually relatively simple. But simple and easy are not the same thing. If there's a secret it's this, and I promise you, I'm not being flippant, I'm speaking to my early-20s self: spend less than you make. Save and invest the difference. See? Easy. But for many of us, painfully difficult. The payoff is immense and liberating, but it's not easy. If it were easy, everyone would do it. Sometimes it's easier, no matter how big our dreams, just to give up, buy the latest shiny thing to distract us from our dreams growing ever-distant, and watch TV while we wait for our ship to come in. There is no ship. The only one that's ever coming in is the one we build ourselves. To suddenly switch metaphors, most of us forge these chains ourselves through our inaction and bad decisions. If these chains are going to be broken, we're the ones that have to do it.

I wrote this book for people who want freedom. Freedom does not come from money, but financial bondage prevents it in many areas of our lives. I want you to have the freedom I have, and to be as unencumbered as possible. You have dreams. And while I don't know what they are, I know they'll be better served without the bondage of debt and constant lack. Our dreams are hard enough to launch without added burdens. What I know is this: it's not complicated, but it's hard. And it can be done. The hardest part is taking the first steps.

The first step is understanding your own relationship with money. To understand what we do with money we have to understand what we think about money. To you, is it, a necessary evil? Is love of it the root of all evil? What was the tone of conversation surrounding money when you grew up? Did you grow up with a lot of money, and therefore never talk much about it, assuming it would always be there, or did you grow up surrounded by lack, and for that same reason never talked about it? Did the words, rich or poor carry certain value to you that has carried over into your adult life? I only ask because what you believe about money will inform how you earn it, spend it, save it, and give it away, and you won't work hard to get any of that straight if you don't first acknowledge that you want it.

Money is not the limited resource we make it out to be. On the scale you and I will deal with, money is abundant enough to go

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around; there is plenty for everyone (though not without some honest hustle). Earning it does not make you a bad person, but how you earn it might. A rich drug dealer is judged for how he makes his money, not for having it. Having it and enjoying it does not make you a bad person, but hoarding it and not allowing it to make a difference in the lives of your loved ones and the world around you, when it could do so much good otherwise, might. I won't presume to tell you how to think about money, or your relationship to it, but I will say this: until you acknowledge the neutrality of money (much like our other precious resource, time) and acknowledge that it is possible to comfortably desire it, earn it, and spend it in accordance with your conscience, as a thing of beauty, you won't make much headway. Money is a tool for possibility, nothing more, but great good and freedom can come from it. And great harm can come from both ignoring it or loathing it.

I'm an unashamed fan of the creative ones, the wild ones who want to try new things, who want to shake things up and experience life to the deepest parts, and who want to share it in all its wildness and beauty with the rest of us, through painting, writing, software coding, poetry, and every other thing your muse leads you to. I hope this book helps you sustain that beautiful effort in some way, and that when it does, you'll pay it forward. It might help to hear my story in more detail.

CHAPTER 2

HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY

MY STORY, PART ONE

On February 14, 2006, I walked into a trustee's office and signed bankruptcy papers. Happy Valentine's Day. It was not my finest hour and I had not arrived there by choice, rather by a long series of choices. I finally got my spending to match my income, but years of bad decisions had accumulated in almost six figures of debt. Where it all went I now have no idea. I always thought I was making good choices, those investments in my life that would pay off when my ship came in. My ship never came in. I now suspect I burned it to ashes with all my spending. So when I walked into a credit counsellor's office I was at the very end of my options. There was no possible way I could ever pay off the interest on my debt, though the principal was long repaid. It just kept growing. That day I was given

options and sent to a trustee to work out the details of renegotiating with my creditors. I was led to believe I had a few options, but my trustee looked at my file and quickly disabused me of that notion. Because I was self-employed, I had only two options: go bankrupt this month or go bankrupt next month. My situation as a self-employed comedian meant no creditor would look at my proposal to renegotiate my debt. So I chose next month, and spend the next 30 days wrapping my mind around the size of my failure.

Signing away my debt was among the most difficult things I've had to do, not because I wasn't glad to be rid of it, but because I was raised to lie in the bed I make and to be responsible. The failure and shame was the hardest part. I will always be grateful for my trustee, a kind woman who spent the next six months recalibrating my financial habits and gently massaging my bruised spirit.

I'm telling you this for a couple reasons, not the least of which is my need to be candid about the path I took out of debt. It's not the way I would have chosen it, but if I had to do it again, the way I did, I would. I should have been more responsible. I wasn't. I should have paid my debts. I couldn't. But in the end I dealt with my debt legally and in good faith, having tried first to renegotiate that debt and pay it off. Canadian bankruptcy laws required certain things of me, and there were a couple debts the bankruptcy would not absolve me of, so I paid them.

But at a certain point I passed a point of no return. I wish I'd seen it coming, but I'd hidden my head in the sand. When I was asked about my reason for bankruptcy, I wrote "Optimism." I could also have honestly written "Ignorance." So when I talk about getting out of debt and give you suggestions about dealing with it, the wisdom is no less true for coming from other sources. My own experience was a faster route. But know this: however you choose it, the moment you find freedom from debt can be one of the most amazing liberties you'll ever feel. Whatever legal road you take to get there, the road is worth whatever is asked of you. Read the conversation I had with photographer David Kingham for a candid look at a man who took three years to pay down his debt and now lives on the road, debt free and happily making his art.

The second reason I tell you my story is because, for some of you, bankruptcy is an option. Not a big fan of the power of fear and shame to keep us from making tough decisions, I want you to know I survived. In fact, I thrived. It took some work. As a man in my thirties, I had to ask my mother to get me a credit card in her name because I couldn't travel and do my work without one. I needed to show every dark corner of my finances to strangers. I spent the following seven years with my head down, waiting to get out from the shadow of my bankruptcy, unable to get a simple credit card. But the good outweighed the difficult. I suddenly had money to invest in my new photography business, with those thousands of dollars not

going to my creditors. I had my own financial advisor in the form of my trustee. I learned more in those first months than in all the years leading up to them. I didn't lose all the things I worried I would, and what I did lose wasn't nearly as difficult to release in light of the trade off. No more debt. Bankruptcy laws are there to protect debtors, not make things worse for them. They are there to keep you in the game. If you're at that place, all I can say is I'm sorry. But I'm excited for you. The future can be brighter than it is right now.

After my bankruptcy I began to experience things I never imagined. I had a fierce desire to stay out of debt and made different choices. I saved money. I began to read about finances and ask others how they managed their money. I was hungry to make up for lost time. I had more money with which to be generous. I retired from comedy and grew a healthy photography career that was shaped by the lessons I learned and the new freedom I had. And I began to reassess my own relationship with money. And then I went to Thailand with a friend, and he said something that changed my life.