

On how to be a creative person with a job



An essay by John Sharian

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As told to John Sharian, 1579 words.

Tags: [Acting](#), [Sports](#), [Photography](#), [Art](#), [Focus](#), [Day jobs](#), [Money](#).

Editor's note: Last year, we interviewed John Sharian for The Creative Independent in a piece titled, [On being efficient](#). In it, he explained how to make the most of your day by finding ways to multitask naturally, and by always pursuing your work with a sense of purpose.

Sharian is an actor and father. He gets up at 4am to train people at a park or gym, works a day job, and often trains more people after that job—all the while making time for his family.

When it hit the news that onetime The Cosby Show actor Geoffrey Owens, also a father, [had a job at Trader Joe's](#) and it was met with disbelief and punchlines, it dawned on us that not everybody understands that many creative people also have day jobs outside of their other pursuits. With that in mind, we asked Sharian to discuss how he manages to juggle so many things, and also what his thoughts are on the general perception that, as a creative person, to have a day job means you've somehow failed.

A couple of months ago, Geoffrey Owens, formerly an actor on *The Cosby Show*, was vilified by the press for having a job at Trader Joe's. There's a weird undercurrent running through America in which some people have an issue with what it means to work, and with doing things that are hard or uncomfortable. There's the idea that certain jobs lack dignity.

Having been an actor for 40 odd years, and having been employed in jobs other than my chosen field for many of those years, I take umbrage with this incident and societal stance.

It smacks of privilege, and of an aversion to sullying one's hands with the hoi polloi. This pervading attitude is particularly rife in the creative sector.

Below are some frequently held views that prevent creative people from seeking employment, and some possible strategies to overcome them. I don't claim that these are for everybody or that I'm objectively right, but they probably are, and I probably am:

"I don't have time." This is outright codswallup. More than likely, what you may not have is a schedule. This necessitates getting up at a specific time, being responsible to someone other than yourself, and going to bed at a specific time to ensure you can get up the following day and do it all over again. Is it a drag? Yeah, but so is lying awake at night with heart palpitations about not making the rent—I've done that and wouldn't trade anything now to go back.

"By having a job, I give up my freedom." That's true, if you have a job and they are paying you, simply allowing you to skip off would be nonsensical. Earn your employer's trust by being very good at your job, and by being

honest with them about what you do, and see if there is a way to get the freedom you desire. In 40 years, I have not had a single employer who wouldn't work with me so I could go off and do auditions or full-scale acting gigs. It meant I had to work harder than the guy who was simply punching in, but it did me no harm and all my employers were intrigued by my "other" life.

"Getting some hack job is admission of failure." Then get a job that interests you or teaches you a skill. I built swimming pools for two years and learned how to scuba dive, tile, and do PVC plumbing—all things that I have been able to use again at some point in my life.

"I won't have time to work out." This relates to the first point in some ways—instead of your newly minted schedule having you up at 7AM, you may have to get up at 5:30AM, and get to bed earlier. Or you could make your commute your workout. Or you could pick a job that is a workout—I worked on the unload at UPS on the night shift. Your job is to go into a 40-foot trailer with an extendable conveyor belt and break down the wall of packages the loader had made on the opposite end. Each package weighs anywhere from 1-70 pounds and must hit the belt label right-side up so it can be scanned at the end of the trailer. I started in the summer when the temperature was 110 degrees inside the trailer, and made it my goal to exceed my previous night's numbers each night. I lost 25lbs, put on lean muscle, and incurred the wrath of the union because I shut down the sorting lines with my volume. Soul Cycle eat your heart out.

"I went to Blah Blah School of Art, this job is beneath me." Maybe there isn't a skill that you learn, a large paycheck, or a sympathetic boss; maybe you take the job just to learn about Life. When I was in high school, I got an invitation to train at a prestigious running camp prior to our school's cross-country season. Instead, I took a job with a landscaping company. One of the lawns I mowed belonged to a man named Alaljajian. I noted this, as part of my family is of Armenian descent, and clearly this guy was as well.

I'd been mowing his lawn for a few weeks when the man called me over. He was tall and slightly stooped. He gave me water and said I'd done his lawn very quickly. I thought perhaps I'd missed a spot or done a bad job. The job was fine he said, but he wondered if I'd noticed the flowers on the far edge of the property. I said I had. "What color were they," he asked. I didn't know, since I'd been racing around the lawn to get done and move on to the next job.

"Take a walk with me," he said. We arrived at the flowers—they were red, orange, and blue. "Beautiful," I said, because they were. He explained that they were the colors of what would become the Armenian flag. That the red stood for the blood of over a million Armenians who were killed in a genocide that the world pretends never happened. How he and his sister survived initially by hiding under corpses that floated in the river, and later by walking miles through the desert in Syria. This probably wasn't part of Blah Blah School of Art's core curriculum—red had a different significance and coding, equally valid, just not applicable to my life.

The end of that story is that I became good friends with Alaljajian. He would invite me into his house to eat the Soujouk he'd made, or walk around the property and teach me the name of trees. Eventually I quit the landscaping company and just worked for Alaljajian. He had lots that needed doing around his yard, but he was 87 and suffered from a respiratory condition. So, he would task me with a job, set up a folding chair, and speak to me while I worked. Mostly it was about Armenia—the history, and the genocide.

I incorporated my training run to his house and would process what he had spoken to me on the way back home each night. I learned about wiring electrics, horticulture, and smoking meats.

When you're trying to be a creative person with a job, it's often about making the best of any given situation.

Here are some tips on how to be a person with a job who can still get other things done and lead a productive and creative life:

Set a sleep pattern. Sleep is the parentheses of your day; decide how much you need (I recommend 6-8), then be religious about getting that exact amount. Disable your snooze button and address yourself in harsh terms if you don't get out of bed immediately.

Set a schedule. To get in what needs to be done during the day, this is essential. Time how long it takes you to get out of the house and get to work. Once you have that, commit it to memory and stick to it. Being late is not an option.

Plan meals and shopping for food. This can become a time-suck during the day or after work. Figure out what food you need for the work day and how you will transport it, then do that. Avoid long lunch breaks—if you can eat while you work, you will be more productive.

Drink coffee. It tastes good and gives you energy. As with everything, moderation is imperative, otherwise it can mess with your sleep.

Pare down your clothing choices and do laundry in advance of the work week. There's a reason the military has a uniform. Decide on yours and wear it.

Work out. Regular training accelerates your metabolic rate and gives you energy. You look better and feel more alive. If your commute to work is your daily workout, so be it.

Amalgamate. Whenever possible, combine activities/pursuits. If you are a photographer who wants to workout on your way to work, carry a camera while you ride your bike. If you're an actor, recite your lines as you run, etc.

Don't waste time. Social media, idle chit-chat, and negative thinking are largely dead ends befitting cocktail punks. Engage sparingly.

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Vocation

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