

On what it takes to sustain a creative life financially



A walk down the long and winding path one must follow to eventually find independence, creative fulfillment, and financial stability.

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As told to Sarah Schulweis, 2529 words.

Tags: [Financial planning](#), [Business](#), [Independence](#), [Day jobs](#), [Income](#), [Business](#).

As I write this, I am my own boss at [Anchor & Orbit](#), a company I founded that helps creative businesses expand their vision and meet their goals. I wasn't always running my own business, however, and it wasn't an easy road to get here. When I first started out on my own, I had no idea what I was doing. I knew plenty of others had figured out how to do it before me, but regrettably, I had no window into their process. This essay is an attempt to share what it took for me to get my business off the ground-plus, what it takes for others to do the same—all for the sake of greater transparency. I hope you find it helpful.

How I found myself here

When I first committed to an independent-income lifestyle, I was rounding out one of the hardest years of my life. I was 27 and had just been laid off from my oh-so-very-important (it was not) “marketing” job. I was dealing with deep sadness and fear on multiple levels, and was desperate to stay free from a job that was sucking the life out of me, while simultaneously being desperate for a paycheck.

As I was trying to bounce back from being laid off, I did the only thing I could think of at the time, which was to tell my friends that I was looking for work that would enable me to pursue a more creative and independent lifestyle. Through those earnest conversations came an opportunity to work with a budding ceramic artist who needed some help with production, among other things. Once I was in and had become a trusted helper, she gave me free rein to do whatever I felt was necessary. I worked long hours, usually billing for only half of them (don't do that!) at \$17 an hour. I knew I was learning on her dime and her dimes were limited.

After a year, I finally worked up the courage to ask for twice my rate and half the time, and she agreed.

While continuing to work with the ceramicist (who I now consider to be my first client), I took on two more clients like her, doing anything that was needed to help their businesses be successful—from shipping products to wholesale management. That “anything needed” approach helped me begin to understand the basic components of what businesses require to function. At that point, I was charging \$25-30 an hour and loved what I was doing, but soon realized that in my work, I'd often create systems that erased the job I was initially hired to do. That's when I realized I could start calling myself a consultant.

Owning the title “consultant” enabled a psychological shift in the way I thought about the work I was doing. This shift led me to increase my rate again, and eventually to articulate the skills I could offer new clients in the form of a program, complete with a business name, website, and set of rates. Before I articulated this “business offering” in a clear program, my annual revenue was around \$40k. After making it clear exactly what I could offer potential clients, and by shifting my offerings based on what I saw clients finding most useful, my revenue

jumped to \$60k, then \$85k, and last year (2018) it was \$110k. (Remember, these numbers are revenue, not net profit.)

My take-home profit in 2018 was closer to \$51k, but god damn, it felt amazing to know I was finally making my own living through a sustainable business that helped other people reach their own income goals.

So what, you say? Who cares! Well, no one talks about this stuff honestly. No one wants to admit how much they need or spend on anything, or how much work they have to put in just to survive. Here I am, opening the door.

The truth is, making it work financially is hard for almost everyone.

In working with a few hundred businesses and creative people trying to sustain themselves financially, I've come to recognize that there are three main "types" of financial situations I come across again and again. People in each case feel alone and unsure about what to do next, and their feelings are often tinged with shame, anxiety, or exhaustion.

All this to say, you are not alone in feeling uncertain about your financial situation. In fact, most everyone is right there with you. Even while writing those last two sentences I wanted to shout, "I AM ALSO STILL FIGURING THIS OUT."

The truth is that while there are multiple ways to support yourself as a creative person trying to live and work, none are flawless. With that in mind, below I'll outline the three primary financial situations creative people tend to face while supporting themselves financially and/or building a creative business.

Financial situation 1: Keeping a day job to support yourself, and squeezing creative work in whenever you can.

One reason to keep that job is something Elizabeth Gilbert said in *Big Magic*: "The reason I always maintained other streams of income was because I never wanted to burden my creativity with the task of providing for me in the material world." Both having a day job and not having one can be good; the point is that you can't be your best self, or put your best work out into the world, if you are always exhausted.

You might be sacrificing a good night's sleep just to squeeze in a few hours a day when you can actively pursue your art. You've decided you'd rather be exhausted than give up the painting, singing, writing, or other creative work. At some point, though, this may become unsustainable—the body will cry out and demand that you sleep more. When this happens, how will you transition?

My advice is to re-assess if you are at the right day job to foster your creativity. If being a teacher drains you, consider other positions where the stress level is lower, and where being there all day doesn't drain you of all your creative energy.

Dig into what makes the most sense for you by asking yourself questions and journaling:

Why am I at [job]? Is it to build a career, to gain recognition, to simply pay my rent, to work towards an early retirement, or to ensure I can pay for a vacation or two every year? *Tell yourself the truth.*

Do those reasons make my life better?

Am I hiding away from my art by staying at [job], or do I really need it right now?

How can I not sacrifice all my energy to my day job?

A tip for anyone in this financial situation: Take good care of yourself and understand why you're doing this work.

Editor's note: For more on balancing full-time work with creative projects, [see this guide](#).

Financial situation 2: Relying on support from others to sustain your life and work.

If you're supported—either financially or in other ways—you may feel bad about the help you're getting when you hear people talking about how unsupported they feel. And that can make you feel alone in what should be your group of creative peers.

The most important thing for you is to flip the narrative. You are fortunate. Be open about where you're at, and let go of the negative story you're playing in your head. If you have a supportive partner who enables you to have some flexibility in the income you're bringing in, run with that flexibility. Funnel that freed-up mental space into being more creative, producing the very best work that you're capable of, and being generous when you can (hire your friends!).

You don't need to pay for every single thing yourself to be a real business owner / artist / writer. However, if this is your financial situation, one thing to consider is how urgency and motivation play into a fulfilling creative practice and life.

You can still create a sense of urgency around your practice by setting some goals:

- Specific and hard income goals
- Types of client project goals
- Money you invest in employees or contractors
- Tangible ways you can give back and support others

Financial situation 3: You're struggling to pay all your own bills through your art/passion/talent/new business.

You started your own thing—the hardest part! Eventually, good gigs started coming in regularly, and you set yourself up as a business.

In this situation, the most significant truth to recognize is that you're already doing a lot, so there are plenty of adjustments you can make, and new strategies you can try. If you already have what you want—running your own business, doing art full-time, etc.—then the next question to ask is, "How can I make this a better, more sustainable situation for myself?"

As you think about adjusting your business to make it more financially sound, it's always important to look at the hard-to-notice things that might be holding you back. Ask yourself:

- What am I paying for, and how are those things actually benefiting me?
- What's coming in, what's going out, and when do I run out of money?
- How much do I truly need to make per month to make it work and sleep soundly at night?

Tip: The best investment a growing business can make is in good graphic design, a bookkeeper, and a business coach. But first, get real with your finances.

Editor's note: The Creative Independent offers wisdom and guides for [running a business](#) and [making a living](#).

So, what does it really take? (Or, some general advice)

One of the reasons I find my job so interesting is that I get to talk to people about their money and see how the sausage is made, i.e. what it actually takes for each individual to support themselves in real time. Regardless of which of the above situations you may find yourself in, what we all must come to understand is that money is

time. Money is safety. And money is so complicated.

If you're trying to cultivate financial conditions for yourself that are sustainable and that support your art, here are some things to keep in mind:

Having a day job/side hustle to fund your creative work is perfectly reasonable, and sometimes crucial. In the creative landscape, it usually takes decades to hone a craft and develop a system that supports you fully. So if you're going to fund your work through a day job or side hustle, make sure it's a job you don't hate that will not take away all of your precious creative energy.

Creating debt is super normal, but beware of it as an energy suck. Some businesses never taken on debt, and some businesses thrive on it. Our government wouldn't function without it. While you can't be afraid to take on some debt, you must do so with your eyes wide open.

Prioritizing paying the IRS is your responsibility. It sucks having to set aside money for taxes, but from my own experience of crawling out of an IRS debt hole, it's worth prioritizing this. Paying quarterly taxes will keep you honest, and will help keep your bookkeeping in order.

Just scraping by each month might be a reality in the beginning. If you're barely paying your bills each month, that means there's a fire under you to keep things evolving. This energy will pay off. Nearly every time I have wanted to give up in earnest, something has come along that saves my butt. I don't believe in luck, but I do believe in the little pushes from the universe that help keep us going.

If you start having extra money each month, use it to invest in your business. Once you've made it this far, you have the privilege to hire the support you need, or to pay for that new website or desk chair. These things will help your business become more sustainable over time. Also, if you're thriving, consider investing in your peers as they have invested in you.

You can't worry too much about how much money your peers are making—but it's worth knowing. If you are undercharging for the value of the work you're doing, you're hurting your whole industry. Sometimes I look back on clients and feel like I was undercharging them, but for where I was in my career, that rate made sense.

Lastly, know that desperation is not helping you. I get a lot of good advice about business from my therapist. At some point, I was discussing how much I needed/wanted some of my proposals to come through. He said, "desperation is not attractive." He wasn't talking about my looks, he was telling me to not hold on so tight that my creative offering's value lost its magic. If you're desperate to sell your art or hook that big-name client, you'll either undervalue yourself or scare away your customers. Take the pressure off yourself, and trust that the right pitches will come through.

To round this out:

The story of my early days, or how I got to this moment, can feel like a distant memory. The path can't be discounted, though, and of course, I wouldn't be who I am without it. These days the bird's-eye view is filled with clarity rather than what it was for so long: confusion, fear, and frustration.

This brings reflection and an appreciation for the shifts that businesses and people make. What was a fit at first is no longer a fit. Getting what you want turns into the inspiration for the next phase of want and need. Having my dream job, a sustainable salary, and more hours free than "working" instigates a reboot and shift in myself.

As you're reading this, I hope you find inspiration to move forward with confidence and see that other people are struggling just as you are struggling. And I hope you become comfortable with the idea that the light at the end of the tunnel is just a wider tunnel. I'm speaking in metaphors, but it's essential to know that where you're going is just another path to the next level, phase, or iteration.



Cold and rainy.

Nils Frahm. Always.

The Mill Cafe in Sacramento.

A little bit anxious about how to present this information from my perspective, while avoiding giving blanket advice.

Name

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Vocation

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