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MY EXPERIMENTS WITH FREEDOM¹

Instead of following a clear career path with the goals of money, status or security, I have searched for a sense of freedom.

I left Pembroke College, Oxford in 1992 with a degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics and a belief that I should try to find myself through travelling the world. After my finals I went to Sydney, did some horrible telesales jobs and then drove around Australia with my partner for a few months. An aunt suggested I volunteer at Amnesty International. I turned up at their Sydney office and offered my services. Within a month I was writing campaign materials. My political eyes had been opened.

I returned to England after further travels, still with no clear idea of 'what to do' except a vague and romantic notion that I wanted to be a 'writer'. I applied for a job as a trainee reporter on a London financial magazine, telling huge lies on my CV about my journalistic experience. I got the job but soon tired of working in an office all day and writing on something I didn't care about. When offered a permanent position after three months, I resigned. My friends thought I was being an idiot.

Human rights work had been in the back of my mind and I was advised I should learn another language to get a job at somewhere like Amnesty. So I did a TEFL course and left for Madrid the next day knowing no Spanish, having no job, nowhere to live and no contacts. Although I suffered from both loneliness and poverty during my year teaching English in Spain, I felt completely alive. I met strange and wonderful people, including a Peruvian poet and former wolf-hunter who changed my life by inspiring an interest in Latin America. I decided to do a Masters in Latin American Studies at London University.

The next two years were absorbed by study, working as a freelance financial journalist to pay the bills, and dealing with the emotional turmoil of a five-year relationship that was unravelling. I was also volunteering in a small human rights organisation, through which I arranged a summer as a human rights monitor in a village of former refugees in the Guatemalan jungle. That direct encounter with extreme poverty and violence, and the people who lived through it, changed me. I wanted to make a difference to their struggle.

Back in the UK, I became deeply involved in Central American solidarity organisations and decided to do a doctorate at Essex University on social movements in Guatemala, believing that my thesis could somehow 'help'. After a couple of years of research and teaching I became disillusioned by academia; the disciplinary boundaries were too limiting and most research ended up in obscure journals to be read only by a few specialists. My thesis, I realised, would not change social reality in Guatemala.

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My partner at the time returned to the US and I moved there to join her. The relationship fell apart and I entered the darkest months of my life. But I decided to stay in the US and try to create a new life. I found some teaching work but by this time Essex was angry that I was not 'in residence' to complete my doctorate and I was forced to return to the UK. I was distraught.

Then my life changed again. I fell in love with a wonderful woman and within a few months we were living together in Oxford, where she was just starting a new job. With the last of my funding I finished my doctorate and retired from academia, aged 32. I'd had enough, despite prospects of a successful career as a sociology lecturer.

By then I knew I wanted a part-time job that would leave me enough time to write books on the art of living. And I wanted my work to involve personal interactions with people in my local community; I'd come to realise how hard it is – both practically and emotionally – to sustain campaigning and working on political issues in distant countries where one is always a stranger. Then, through a series of coincidences and chance encounters, I was offered a position as a project coordinator in Oxford at a small charity called The Oxford Muse, which creates conversations between people of different backgrounds and cultures. It was perfect.

So here I am now, working at The Oxford Muse in the afternoons and writing books in the mornings. I also have the time to experiment in the art of living: I recently tried working as a gardener and as a carpenter. I make just enough money to survive and I have an enormous sense of freedom.

I have always remained open to change, and have followed my passions, my intuition and love. And that has made all the difference.

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