

JOB MARKET

# Expressing Passions (Just Not Your Own)

Preoccupations

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BROWSING through the U.S. News & World Report list of “Best Careers 2008,” and secretly trolling for a hot new field, I discover to my surprise that I’m already in one. When I’m not writing articles or books of my own, I sometimes moonlight as a ghostwriter — an occupation that made its debut on the list this year, alongside careers like audiology, genetic counseling and urban planning.

It tickled me to see ghostwriting in such good company. After all, this is not what you’d call an established profession. No little kid says, “Mommy, I want to be a ghostwriter when I grow up.”

In books, articles and book proposals, I’ve channeled the voices of Fortune 500 executives, an Ivy League M.D., an Army captain in Iraq and many others. But this line of work has always struck me as something you just stumble into.

At least that’s what I thought until I did a Google search on “ghostwriting” and found an assortment of slick Web sites promoting ghostwriting services. For \$18,000 to \$26,000 a book, you can hire a “commercially successful” ghostwriter — or upgrade to a “celebrity” or “best selling” writer for a total cost of \$40,000 to \$250,000. (I’m clearly not charging enough.)

Still, ghostwriting sticks out on the hot jobs list like a pig in a prom dress for an obvious reason: Co-writing (as we call it when we’re feeling fancy) has always carried a whiff of scandal. When I mention that I’m writing a book for a doctor or an

executive, I sense a certain discomfort, as if I'd said that I write term papers for a living.

"You write it and they get all the credit?" my friends gasp. Yes, if they pay me enough. In the secret language of ghostwriting, I'm called "the writer" and my partner is "the author," and a "with" credit usually pays more than an "and" credit. But complete anonymity pays best of all. (Well, it's not complete anonymity: ghostwriting contracts almost always stipulate a kind mention of the writer in the acknowledgments — though not necessarily for writing. At times, these may read rather cryptically, as in: "This book would never have been written without..." )

Even when I explain all of this, I detect an undercurrent of sympathy, as if people were comparing me to the Debbie Reynolds character in "Singin' in the Rain," warbling my heart out behind the curtain while the harpy-voiced Lina Lamont gets all the credit. This pity follows from the unspoken judgment that I really should be singing in my own voice. After all, a writer with even a little talent must have a novel on the hard drive, right?

I just don't think this happens to audiologists.

Doing something people regard as art — writing — for cash, and in someone else's voice, seems suspect in a world where we're exhorted to pursue our passions and express our true selves.

Timothy Ferriss, the author of "The 4-Hour Workweek," urges readers to eliminate tedious, time-consuming employment (or at least squish it into one busy weekday morning) and to devote the rest of their time to their true passions. In his case, that means motorcycle racing, kickboxing and tango competitions.

One of his secrets to success, he says, is outsourcing humdrum tasks (for example, writing-related research) to assistants abroad. Why compromise by doing "work for work's sake," he asks.

As someone whom people outsource to, I feel rather frumpy and old-fashioned reading all of this. After all, ghostwriting casts the compromises of cash versus passion in stark relief. Sure, most people suppress some aspect of themselves in the

office. But the whole point of ghostwriting is to suppress my voice in order to mimic someone else's. I defer my own passions to write about the author's. For all my advice to my clients, in the end, it's their book.

These lessons haven't come easily. In one project, I wrote that the author wished that her mother, instead of a nanny, could have cared for her kids. "That's not how I feel at all!" she fired off in an e-mail message. (Now that I'm a parent myself, I understand.) I argued strenuously to cut the final chapter of one book; ultimately, however, it won the most praise from reviewers.

SOMETIMES, suspending your own ego isn't such a bad thing: Compromise in the work world can bring compensation, too — beyond the kind that pays the bills. Ghostwriting has let me climb inside other people's lives and forced me to respect choices I wouldn't have made myself.

I've learned to listen more carefully, and to never, ever assume that I know how people feel. These skills improve my work when I'm writing under my own byline, too. So I'm skeptical when I hear sunny exhortations urging workaday slobs like me to chase our dreams and to forgo (or condense) the evils of the office and all its compromises.

Of course, I want to pursue my passions and to write in my own voice. But I have other passions, too: Two of them (my children) go to day care and one (my husband) loves adventure travel. If I refused to make compromises among them, we'd all be shortchanged.

For me, writing in another voice, about other people's passions, has helped me to understand a lot about my own and how to create balance among them. So I'll continue my scandalous sideline. In the end, maybe it really is a best career. At least until my clients start outsourcing their memoirs overseas.

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