Introduction - The Shameless Creative

It came as a huge shock to me. I was sitting in my office having worked on this project for months and, now that it had huge success, there was no joy. There was no elation. There was only more pressure. More fear. More shame.

The previous six months of my life had been focused on a singular purpose. In a way, the previous three *years* had been focused on this moment.

It had started with Ramit Sethi and the book *I Will Teach You To Be Rich*. I had started working with Ramit behind-the-scenes to help with the launch of the book. I’ve always been a big reader and getting to work with an author on their book launch was a lot of fun.

As the upcoming launch of the book loomed, I had low expectations. Ramit was an unknown guy in his mid-20s with no publicist and no traditional media of any kind. I figured he would sell a few copies of his book and then it would kind of fizzle out. Until it didn’t. The book sold so many copies that it debuted on the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* bestseller lists. It was amazing to watch, and it sparked something in me. I wanted to figure out how this worked.

For the next three years I studied and researched and worked. I wanted to learn how this was possible. I worked with a lot of different authors in a lot of different capacities experimenting and learning along the way. I pushed myself hard. I stressed about it. I stayed up late, got up early. I built a team around myself to support the work.

And then, three years later, I was put in charge of Daniel Pink’s upcoming launch of his book *To Sell Is Human*. He wasn’t working with anyone else on the launch. It was all on me. I finally had a chance to put into practice everything I had been learning for three years. And it worked. *To Sell Is Human* debuted at #1 on the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* bestseller lists.

This thing I had wanted so badly, I finally had. Yet, it was empty of joy. What happened here? Why wasn’t there more? Why didn’t I finally feel worthy enough? I had finally proven that my work was relevant and good and worthwhile. I had come up with something new and original to hit a very real goal, yet reaching that goal had done nothing for me except heap more pressure and stress on my back. Why was this?

Two weeks before my first book came out, I was standing in a parking lot chatting with a couple friends. I had been walking to lunch and ran into them along the way. One of them, Lucas, asked what I was working on and I told him my first book was about to come out. He asked what the title was and I told him *Your First 1000 Copies: The Step-by-Step Guide to Marketing Your Book*. Lucas, always the soft spoken, thoughtful guy, paused for a moment. He nodded, then said, “I hope you sell at least a thousand of them.”

My vision blurred and my stomach churned. Somehow I had never thought of this. I had written a book about book marketing. I had titled that book *Your First 1000 Copies*. And I had never considered the question, “What if I can’t even sell a thousand copies of my own book?” In a world where most books sell less than 250 copies in their entire first year, this was a very real possibility.

Fast forward a month and all was well. My book had launched. I had sold well over a thousand copies. I was now on the other side of the country at a conference where many of my friends were also attending. From the outsider’s perspective, everything was amazing. My book was selling. It was getting great reviews. My friends and I were having a great time and they were congratulatory and excited about my accomplishment of publishing my first book and the early success I was seeing. All the while, I wanted to collapse in on myself. There was no excitement. I wasn’t participating in their joy. I was feeling only shame.

*The Shameless Creative* is about a journey that every creator begins, though few complete. It asks tough questions like “Why are we as inherently creative beings spending our days *not* creating?” and “Why are we unable to enjoy our creative successes?” and “What happens when we try to create something new after a big success?” and “Can joy and excitement and happiness be a constant state for the truly creative person?”

Over the last decade, I’ve had the pleasure of meeting and working with hundreds of amazingly creative people. I’ve stood in the kitchen of top bestselling authors talking late into the night. I’ve shared drinks with artists at the top of their field. I’ve met with brilliant business people as they planned out their next moves.

More importantly, I’ve seen behind-the-scenes on every stage of a creator’s path. From the early days when there is nothing but mistakes and failures and a myriad of starts and stops. Through early success and growth, to finally reaching the success that was always dreamed about. And I’ve seen the dark side. I’ve seen the artists who were envied by their peers but hiding their visits to rehab. I’ve heard the fears pour out of top bestselling authors as they wonder if the next book will be when everyone finally realizes they’re a fraud. I’ve seen the crushing defeat of a failure after several successes.

And, of course, I’ve been on my own journey. From the early days when I would spend half the day playing video games so I could avoid my work while struggling to pay the bills for my young family. Through my own early growth and then big successes.

What surprised me more than anything was the common path that each of these creators took. I’ve found that this path goes through five stages.

In John Bunyon’s allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian and his friend Pliable begin an epic journey to a place described as beautiful and joyful and better than their current lowly life. However, as soon as the trip truly begins, the two travelers fall into a bog, the Slough of Despond. When Pliable asks Christian where they are and Christian admits he doesn’t know, Pliable becomes angry.

“At this Pliable […] said to his fellow, Is this the happiness you have told me all this while of? If we have such ill speed at our first setting out, what may we expect between this and our journey’s end? May I get out again with my life, you shall possess the brave country alone for me.“

The first stage is the beginning. This is where most people stop. They dream of writing the great American novel or having their photographs displayed across the world or starting a business that makes them a millionaire, but at the first sign of trouble, they retreat back into their lives with promises that they will try again one day and beliefs that they’re just not the creative type.

For those that do press forward, it only gets worse. Shame falls on your back like a burden that you must carry around for all to see. When you go a week without pursuing your creative work, you are ashamed of the wasted time. When you are creating, you are ashamed that you work isn’t good enough.

This is when there is only work and no reward. You are developing your craft with no tangible benefit that any of it does or will ever matter.

Ira Glass, host and producer of the radio show *This American Life*, says it like this:

“Nobody tells this to people who are beginners, I wish someone told me. All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste. But there is this gap. For the first couple years you make stuff, it’s just not that good. It’s trying to be good, it has potential, but it’s not. But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is why your work disappoints you. […] It’s gonna take awhile. It’s normal to take awhile. You’ve just gotta fight your way through.”

The second stage is the transition. You move into a space where you are creating actual good work. You’ve been working on your craft and you’re legitimately creating work that is living up to your taste.

However, this brings on a new set of challenges because what you find is no one cares about your work. You submit your manuscripts to agents and publishers and get form rejections back. You publish your work online and they are lost in the sea of content.

This is when your well meaning friends and family start the whisperings of “keep your day job” or “maybe this just isn’t for you.” This part is a long slog. You know you are producing great work but nobody seems to care. They’re not reading your blog, you’re racking up rejections, and you are generally being ignored by those in your space.

Eventually, as you continue to create and put your work out into the world, you will start finding success. You’ll start building an audience. You’ll get the publishing deal. You’ll start getting hired to shoot more jobs. Word will start getting around. Success will start showing up.

This is the third stage of the creative’s journey. This is early success. This is also where the most surprising type of shame falls in on you. You find that your success doesn’t actually fix anything. You’ve made it so far, yet all you see is how far you have left to go. Your friends are still more popular than you. They’re making more money than you. They’re selling more pieces than you. In a way, it causes more problems.

That goal post you had for so long just gets moved further away. You have to work harder. Achieve more. Otherwise you still won’t be good enough.

Then something worse may happen to you. You’ll reach the fourth stage where you actually reach your dreams, the pinnacle. You wake up one morning, as I did, and realize that the thing you always wanted, you finally have. Maybe it’s getting your own gallery opening or selling your business or hitting a bestseller list. Maybe your reality far surpasses what you thought you would ever achieve. And yet, you’re stuck.

Elizabeth Gilbert faced this with her book *Eat, Pray, Love*. After years of writing in general obscurity, she published a book that went out into the world and sold millions of copies and eventually became a big Hollywood movie starring Julia Roberts. This is the top. The biggest dream a writer could ever hope for. But now what? How do you keep creating when, as Gilbert said, “my greatest work may be behind me?” [TK].

A new kind of shame falls on you. A great sense of loss. You’ve reached the thing you thought you always wanted and you feel empty. Directionless. Creatives often become hopelessly blocked in this situation. This is also where the vast majority of successful creatives stop. They will spend decades churning the pressure and shame that comes with real success.

It is the rare creative that moves on to the fifth stage, the truly creative life. The place where you are free of the emotional and physical hurdles and are able to create freely and joyfully.

These five distinct phases of a creative path — the beginning, transition, early success, the pinnacle, life — are the steps that every creative must walk in order to find peace and joy in their work. At each step of this path you will face new levels of shame and fear.

There are two very real dangers at each step of in your creative journey. The first, is that you will quit. This is most dangerous in the early steps of your career. Most days, it will be easier to quit than to keep working because nobody will notice but you. It’s not like you have a legion of adoring fans that will freak out if you never release another album. You have to keep creating in a vacuum.

The second danger is you will stop the internal growth on your journey. I don’t mean that you will stop creating, merely that you will stop becoming healthy. This becomes dangerous once you start finding success. You feel the pressure to continue producing great work. You have actual deadlines and expectations you much meet. You’ve reached your dream of success, but that dream has become a nightmare. You realize that your shame and fear have followed you all the way to the top. This is where so many creatives lose their freedom, sobriety, and sanity.

I believe that the idea that you must suffer for your art is a lie. You don’t have to sacrifice everything. You don’t have to settle into depression. You don’t have to constantly punish yourself both physically and mentally in order to succeed. Your best work is not found in pain, but in joy.

In this book I’m going to show you both how to unleash your creativity into the world, and how to do it without losing your sanity, sobriety, or freedom.

My hope for you is both that you reach all of the creative success of your dreams, and that you are able to truly and joyfully accept it.

I’m going to show you how.