# Introduction - The Shame-less Creative

#non-fiction #shamelesscreative #grahlmethod

It’s March XX 2006. My son is fifty-two days old.

My wife Candace is with him every single moment. He—as he should be—is her number one priority. There isn’t any uncertainty about the division of labor in our family.

Candace is full time at home. I am the breadwinner.

I’m at work. At 9:17 a.m., after my first cup of coffee, I walk to my supervisor’s office, and tap on his open door.

“Is this a bad time?”

He clears me to come on in.

“I’m tendering my resignation.”

Now I am not especially courageous and Candace is certainly no idiot. So how did we come to the decision that the best time for me to leave our only source of income—my nine to five/steady Eddy job doing what I had trained four years in College to master—was less than two months after having our first child?.

What it came down to was this.

The stress, pain and yes shame of not doing what I knew I could do—creating Tim Grahl stuff, marketing that stuff, and earning a living selling that stuff—had reached intolerable levels.

I’d been miserable for years, not Grinch-like miserable, more of a dejected “woe is me, I’m not doing what I should be doing” kind of general malaise. Candace finally lost her patience and told me that if I didn’t bet on myself now, when our son was an infant requiring constant supervision but no school tuition, I never would.

Now before I resigned, I did what reasonable people do. I got my proverbial ducks in a row. I’d negotiated a barter deal with my church. In exchange for my designing and webmastering a website for the congregation, they’d let me use an old cleaned out closet as my office rent free.

With our savings, I had plenty of time to get my new business up and running and also spend more time at home.

I had massive motivation (my family depended upon my success), a backlog of great ideas ready to implement, some terrific leads to get the business off the ground as well as committed clients, and practically zero overhead.

Do you know where this is heading?

Yes, complete disaster.

Why is it that when we do everything “right,” meaning we save our pennies, consult with our loved ones and get indispensable advice, plan our escape perfectly and then actually pull the cord and set out on our journey to self-actualization and personal fulfillment…we fall.

Hard.

A few months later, our son was twice his size but we were completely out of money, I shamefully called my parents and asked for help so I wouldn’t miss our mortgage payment.

What happened? How did I manage to snap out of it?

That’s the first part of this book.

What happened next was even weirder.

I was waylaid by what Steven Pressfield calls creative Resistance, that nasty monster with a thousand faces and a million tactics to keep you from your work.

In March of 2006, I finally took the plunge. After a few years of working on my own stuff, I decided to quit my job and go out on my own. My first son had just been born two months before and, with my wife staying home to care for him full time, I decided would be the best time to quick the job with the steady paycheck and take the leap.

I negotiated a deal with my church to give me office space (a closet they had cleaned out that was just big enough for a desk) and internet access in exchange for me helping them build and maintain their website. I decided that, from day one, I would treat this like a real job. I’d get up in the morning, get ready, get dressed, and get to my desk at 8am. Just like if I had a real job.

The only problem was, once I was at the office, I didn’t get any work done. I **had** work to do. I had clients that had hired me to do the work, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I was terrified. The pressure to make money so we can pay all our bills was too much. On the drive into the office I would promise myself I’d get started and get to work, but instead I would open up the video game Warcraft and start playing.

I’d make promises that I would just play for an hour. And then that would turn into two hours. And then my buddy Dan who worked down the hall would stop by and we’d talk for an hour.

Lunch would come and go and I was yet to get started on anything. So I’d check my email, answer a few of them, then move on to reading articles online about how to run a successful business and how to be more productive. Then, somewhere around 4pm, with the end of the day looming, I’d franticly start getting some work done but it was hard to really accomplish much in an hour. So I’d stop a few minutes later and start working on a todo list for the next day. I figured if I planned really well, I’d be able to actually buckle down tomorrow and get some work done.

Then I’d pack up my bag, head out to my red, two door Chevrolet Cavalier and drive the ten minutes home. I’d always turn something on the radio so I could distract myself from the shame and guilt I was feeling. Once home, I’d lie when Candace asked about my day and tell her how much I got done. That worked until a few months later when were completely out of money and I was calling my parents to borrow money so I wouln’t miss our mortgage payment that month.

Fast forward a few years and I found myself at a bar at the top of the Nines Hotel overlooking downtown Portland, Oregon. It was July of 2013 and I was visiting one of my favorite cities in the world. The sun was setting and I was posing for a picture with my friend and bestselling author, Pamela Slim. She was holding a copy of my first book which had just published a few weeks before.

It was the last day of a conference called the World Domination Summit. Every year a few thousand people descend on the city for three days of parties, meet ups, and keynote speeches designed to inspire you to live an unconventional life. To live the life you dreamed about.

Pam was just one of a dozen or so friends with me on that roof top celebrating the successful launch of my book. For me, it was a culmination of my most successful year ever. After years struggling to grow my book marketing consultancy business, the last six months had culminated into a stretch of wins that out shown any of my previous work.

It had started with the launch of the book **To Sell Is Human** by Daniel H. Pink on December 31st. I had been working with Dan for two years at this point and he had put me completely in charge of the launch of his new book. I had spent six months planning and working on every detail of the launch. The result? It had debuted at #1 on the **New York Times**, **Wall Street Journal**, and **Washington Post** bestseller lists.

When Dan called me with the news, I should have been excited. But I wasn’t. I only felt more pressure. You see, I had also been hired by Chip and Dan Heath to launch their newest book. **Decisive** was due out in March and wanted me to help hit the major bestseller lists. Alongside of this, I was managing a few other launches for other clients.

So, after I got off the phone with Dan, I dug back into the trenches and worked for the next three months on my other launches. **Decisive** ended up hitting #2 on the **New York Times** bestseller list and, that same week, I had five clients on the **New York Times** bestseller lists at the same time.

Once again, I had done it. I had hit every goal I had set out to hit, plus a few that I could never imagine hitting. There was one problem though. I had also finished up the manuscript for my very first book, **Your First 1000 Copies** and had set a publish date for the end of June.

For me, there was no excitement around the successful book launches. There was no celebration. There was only more work. I now how to publish and launch a successful book of my own. Back into the work I went. I worked hard and I launched the book.

The launch couldn’t have gone better. It immediately became one of the bestselling marketing books on Amazon. I surpassed all of my early sales goals. Early reviews were positive and included an amazingly positive review from a highly respected author who had randomly happened upon the book.

Then I found myself in Portland, posing for a picture at a celebration and all I felt was shame. I still wasn’t good enough. I had hit every major goal I had set out to hit, including some I couldn’t have imagined going after, but all my mind could do is point out to me everything I had done wrong. Everything I still hadn’t accomplished. All the work I still had left to do.

That goal post I had set out for myself — that thing that I was sure would finally make me feel like I was enough — I just moved it further away. All I could think of was the work I still had left to do. There was no joy. There was no peace. I was still broken. I still wasn’t good enough.

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 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. Whether it’s starting a business or trying to write that first novel, I’ve found that this path goes through four 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 called 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 standard, 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, eventually becoming 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, creative bliss. 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 life — the beginning, transition, early success, the pinnacle, bliss — are the path 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.