

Writer Inspired to Find Creative Way Out of Work

by Valerie Poulin

If Oprah posed the question, Anderson Cooper's *Dispatches from the Edge* urged me to action.

On one of Oprah's shows dealing with both personal and professional fulfillment she suggested that rather than focus on what you wanted to *do*, each viewer ask herself the question "What kind of person do I want to *be*?"

This was not welcome news for me. I figured that I was already the person I wanted to be, or nearly, anyway. I was planning to do some other things once I figured out my career.

Unfortunately, this was taking longer than I anticipated. I have long been disappointed with my work. Even trading one unwanted corporate career for a new, and as it turns out, even less satisfying line of work.

I came across Cooper's book, in July 2006, when a noxious odour caused by an accidentally opened canister of bear repellent was accidentally discharged forcing the evacuation of the office building in the financial district of downtown Toronto. As the crowd waited outside for hazardous materials and emergency workers cleared the scene, I walked off to a nearby bookstore.

Along the wall of new releases, I noticed *Dispatches from the Edge* and remembered Anderson Cooper's appearance on *Oprah* in which the writer talked about the loss of his father and brother—a basis for his career and the book's underlying theme. At the cash register, the store's manager rang through my purchase and excitedly raved about the book.

During the three-hours I waited for the all-clear from building maintenance, I read a good portion of the book. The stories, the individuals, they pulled me into the narrative and I spent the next two days and evenings engrossed in the book until I finished it. Then I started to read it again.

And there it was, on page 15, marked by a fluorescent Post-it Note: "Sometimes I wonder if I'm the person I was born to be, if the life I've lived really is the one I was meant to, or if it is some half life, a mutation engineered by loss, cobbled together by the will to survive."

For all the well-written prose, the tragically told stories, this is the one paragraph that I held so close it hurt.

Chapter after chapter, tragedy, loss, sadness, hope. Some tears were for the survivors, some for the dead; others were for my own loss and for my lack of social responsibility. There were tears, too, for an unfulfilling job and my inability to understand the ill feelings I harboured towards it. But, there was something else, something that touched close to home.

Like other writers whom I find inspiring, the stories sparked a strong personal and creative—poems and essays, in addition to a response causing conflicting emotion because it reflected my inaction.

I took notice of the way the author faced obstacles—how he made his own way, followed his whatever called him to travel to places where people were dying. Starvation, war, violence, conflict is not the average stuff of a life of a technical writer.

The passage made me see my own inaction, my lack of citizenship, my lack of global conscientiousness. Perhaps this was the reason for my safe, but wretched career choice.

Where I thought that I been brave and fearless in my decisions in life, *Dispatches* showed me that somewhere between earning a living and my part-time artistic pursuits, I'd become complacent. And behind the complacency was fear.

At some point in my earlier life, I wanted to write about things that mattered to me and could matter to others, things that could make a difference. Only

occasionally, I looked within my community and beyond my country.

So this was my turning point, my Oprah Ah-ha! moment. What kind of person do you want to *be*? she asked. I finally had an answer. I wanted to be the kind of person who contributes to the world, rather than just lives in it. And taking a pointer from author Anderson Cooper, a guy with who found his own way by sharing the lives of others, I knew I was going to have to find a creative way to make it happen for me.

I kept *Dispatches* on my bedside table for some time because it reminded

me to stick to my end goal, no matter what.

While the memoir is at turns tragic, emotionally fatiguing, and consoling in its humanity, it is at all times remarkable and inspiring.

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