# Money Is Random [1]

September 22, 2014 Writer's Life [2]
Money [3]

## Theme Essay by Steve Adams

### One Writer's Unexpected Journey Home

[4]

**I have a good relationship with my dad.** Outside the adolescent wobble here and there, I always have, regardless of the differences in the lives we've chosen. He majored in business and had a family to support. He was a Sears man, until they bought him out many years ago. He doesn't even recognize the company anymore.

During the decades I've spent bouncing around the country, writing—always writing—I knew my parents would help me if worse came to worse. "The door swings both ways," they told me. On top of that, we actually enjoy each other's company. Knowing I could go back home to Grand Prairie, Texas, and the '70s-style ranch house I grew up in allowed me to take chances with my life I might not have otherwise.

In 2008, I was enjoying the last of eleven straight years in New York City drawing PowerPoint charts for a multinational corporation. It was a dream day job, supporting both my writing and my apartment in Brooklyn. When the economy collapsed, I didn't quite recognize how good I had it. Then, by early 2009, I'd lost my job. I stuck it out until the

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following summer when my lease ran out, applying for work where I could, but never with much hope.

Money matters everywhere, but especially in New York. In the early ‘90s, when I lived in Manhattan, I remember walking past a row of homeless men sitting on cardboard mats in a subway station. One guy looked up, and our eyes met. He was thin and white, and he wore wire-rimmed glasses. He had a dozen or so books of literature stacked on his cardboard along with a few other possessions, but I only remember the books. They frightened me; they could’ve been my books. *That guy could be me.* One thing New York teaches you is it’s easier to end up on the street than you’d think—for anyone—and I promised myself to never push my luck that far.

So, now without a job and the economy in tatters, I did the sensible thing. I took my parents up on their lifelong offer; packed up my belongings; brought along Scooter, my small, green, twelve-year-old parrot; and crash-landed in my hometown. My parents were great. They’re always great. But lying sleepless in my sister’s old bed in her room and staring at the dark ceiling, I quickly realized how far I’d fallen.

Many people fall much farther and hit harder, of course. In the scheme of things, what’s one more writer falling from the sky and landing where there’s food and shelter? Still, living in New York City had become part of my identity. I felt exiled from the better part of myself, wondering where I went wrong.

Scooter, on the other hand, adapted quickly. He’d completely freaked out when he realized we were leaving the apartment he loved so much (claimed, actually, as *his*) in Brooklyn, his feathers tight to his body as he skittered around his cage looking for the couch, the TV, my chair—all our *stuff*. But once I’d bungi-corded his cage to the passenger seat in the moving truck I’d rented and we started traveling through New Jersey, he relaxed. He puffed up, staring out the window at the scenery, then turning to me and nodding his head. We sang songs all the way to Grand Prairie.

My initial plan had been to become an English teacher in Grand Prairie or one of the other Dallas suburbs, until I could scratch my way down to Austin. But about the time I was putting my larger possessions into storage, Governor Rick Perry cut public education funding so drastically that Texas schools were shedding experienced English teachers left and right. Regardless, I networked as much as I could, applied for positions all across the area, and even went on a few interviews.

Since I had top-level office skills, I also attempted to get a job with the state (though funding for those jobs had been cut, too) or in the private sector. But I was older than average and exotic—a NYC escapee with a master’s degree; a published author and produced playwright. In the late ‘90s, I’d even been a guest artist at the University of Texas, and I thought my language abilities (one of the high schools I applied to had taught a short story I’d written) and all those years working in a high-stakes corporation in New York City would make me look attractive. Now, I just think it made me look unpredictable. “Exotic” may be a desirable trait in a lover, but not in an employee. At least not in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex.

I sent out hundreds of resumes. I’d come home from yet another unpromising job interview to find my parrot screeching “Hey, Scooter!” from his cage at the birds in the backyard or riding my mom’s shoulder or being trained alongside Daisy the Boston terrier on the living-room rug. He was doing fine. As for me, I knew it was time to get philosophical. Even if my life was in the shitter and my best days seemed behind me, at least I wasn’t going to starve, and neither would Scooter.

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So, I took the only work I could find—substitute teaching. For over a year, I chased assignments and woke up before dawn every weekday to head out and pull down the $10 an hour they paid me to keep students between the ditches. It's exhausting, frequently humiliating work.

Afterward, I'd drive home, throw my sub bag into my room, and head back out to write.

Writing and Scooter, whom I'd raised from birth, were the anchors that kept me from sliding off the road. I knew I had to keep things together for my little bird's sake, if not my own. And once I sat down in a favorite chair at Starbucks (by far the best option Grand Prairie offered), opened my laptop, and began writing, for the first time that entire day I felt like myself. I could breathe. My life had meaning. Thoughts of death did not pop up like ads on a computer screen.

One Sunday morning, my dad was in his recliner, sipping coffee and looking through the *Dallas Morning News*. An opinion piece had caught his eye. He didn't tell me who the author was—and I didn't really want to know—because the writer was arguing that only one thing made an artist legitimate.

"The answer is if you've gotten paid for it," my dad said.

Cash value separated the pros from the hobbyists. This immediately raised my hackles, but I understood my father had been wrestling with this question on my behalf. Nor did he consider the comment a cut against me. I'd won a major short story contest years earlier and cashed a check that was pretty fat—if you didn't have to live on it. In his mind, that put me in the "paid" category. I was legit.

In my mind, however, the definition scanned horribly.

"What about Emily Dickinson?" I said. "Or Van Gogh?"

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He didn't look up from his paper. He just took a sip of coffee, processing this. Great artists who died in poverty are legion, I thought, but I didn't say it. I'd already made my point.

"I think being an artist has more to do with whether you can stop," I said.

He heard me. Last year, when I published a piece in *Talking Writing* that explores why I can't stop working on novels even though I haven't gotten one published yet, my dad read it and said, "Yeah, that's the way it is." He acknowledged the hard life, the "hard choices" answer I'd presented in the essay as a definition of the working artist. The fatalism of it, even.

Because the truth is, being a writer is not about money. It's never been about money. If you make it about money, you've missed the whole point, and your work will suffer. So will you, if you really are an artist. You will have turned from your god for a dollar. And no dollar amount will relieve that loss, that separation from your most basic identity, which some would call your soul.

I happen to believe in souls: the souls of artists; the soul of my darling parrot Scooter, who passed from me a year ago; the soul of anyone reading this. I believe in the Church of Art and the altar of one's offerings and losses. I believe there's more to this world than we can either know or imagine. And so I say this now: Commit to meaning and mystery instead of money. You'll be carried much farther, and your work will likely be better, too.

But should you ever be so lucky that money comes your way via your art, my advice is don't take it too seriously. Money is random; its meaning is not directly related to the value of your work. Be sure to spend some of it, and spend it wisely. Buy something that will stick around for awhile and support you.

I had the fortune years back to get a short story published in the *Missouri Review*. It brought in enough cash for me to purchase a topcoat that was on sale at the Men's Wearhouse—a thick, dark, heavy coat with a high collar that buttoned around my neck and with a hem that hit below my knees. It kept the wind off me as I wandered the streets of New York. On those freezing nights, I would hug it close and be amazed that someone had cared so much for a story I'd written that they'd funded a garment that both supported and protected my body. I wore it until it ran out, until it pilled up all over, rips and holes ravaging its lining, and it was an embarrassment to my friends.

That coat was the best use I've ever made of a dollar. It never ceased to remind me that, yes, my writing could matter in a material way as well. I was lucky. How could that possibly not be enough?

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- "Wish I Could Quit You" [5] by Steve Adams, *Talking Writing*, Holiday 2013.

**Art Information**

- "Crossroads: Success or Failure" [6] © Chris Potter, StockMonkeys.com [4].
- "3D Recession Recovery" [7] © Chris Potter, StockMonkeys.com [4].

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Steve Adams's stories and essays have been widely published. He's won *Glimmer Train's* Short Story Award for New Writers, been nominated for Pushcart Prizes in fiction, and anthologized. He's also written plays produced in New York City, been a guest artist at the University of Texas, been a scholar at the Norman Mailer Writers' Colony, and is currently a writing coach in Austin, Texas. For more information, see his website Steve Adams Writing [8].

As for that season in Grand Prairie, when Steve was substitute teaching and writing in the evenings, an essay he was working on then called "Touch" was eventually published in *The Pinch* (Spring 2012). It went on to win a Pushcart Prize. As Steve notes, "I didn't make a penny off of it. I didn't need to."

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