

EPISODE 99

“What’s the most important instead of the amount of time you have is really the repetition is showing up every day. If I had a choice between having a full day on the weekend to work and an hour every day to work, I would pick the hour every day every time.”

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:31.3] JG: Welcome to The Portfolio Life. I’m Jeff Goins and this is the show where we explore one important question. What does it take to live a truly creative life? And of course the answer to this is it takes lots of things. There’s more than one answer to the question and so each show, each conversation, each interview we do is an attempt to shed light on a different perspective that helps you understand how you can answer this question in your own life.

The idea behind The Portfolio Life is that it’s going to be more than one thing. You are not just one thing. You are not an automaton made to just do one thing into endless repetition. In fact, we all have lots of different interests and those can fit together in really unique, interesting and meaningful ways and so when we embrace this portfolio life, I believe that we do better work.

That we do more interesting work and we do work that is more personally gratifying and meaningful to ourselves and therefore to the world and nobody that I’ve talked to so far understands this integration of work and creativity and doing lots of different things in your life better than my guest today, Austin Kleon.

It took me a while to track down Austin, he’s a busy guy. A very popular speaker, bestselling author, most notably of the book *Steal Like an Artist*, he also has a journal accompanying that which we talk about as well as a follow up book called *Show Your Work*, all great amazing books. Easy reads that you can sit down and read, they’re illustrated books. Really great gift books that I highly recommend you pick up and they’re really affordable. So you can pick up several books and give them away as gifts to friends.

In this interview, Austin and I talk about the tension between a creative career and the business that it takes to drive that career and how do you manage that when you become so successful

that you're no longer just creating, that you're having to manage a business and you're having to do administrative task.

Austin and I talk about that, he's very candid, I'm very candid. This is something that I am struggling with a lot these days and he helped me shed some light on some areas that I found very practical. Hopefully you will too. So we're going to jump in here. The big idea here is that when you set out to do creative work, there are all of these obstacles.

All of these things that maybe you didn't consider like how am I going to market this, how am I going to get paid for this, how am I going to manage this system that I've built to run this thing? There are all these things that you face that we don't really talk about or think about and in this interview, Austin and I explore that.

So without any further ado, here is my conversation with Austin Kleon.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:03:15.3] JG: So Austin, I feel like we should be doing this over tacos or something.

[00:03:19.4] AK: Yeah, that would make sense or, I mean if you were here.

[00:03:23.4] JG: Yes or entirely over Twitter, these are the things that I know about you, tacos and Twitter.

[00:03:28.1] AK: Tacos and Twitter, yeah, you know there could be worse things that you were known for.

[00:03:32.3] JG: I guess that's true.

[00:03:33.4] AK: But yeah, that's pretty much — I don't know. That's probably a big part of my life, Tacos and Twitter. It could be worst.

[00:03:41.1] JG: Yeah, Tacos, Twitter, Netflix. So I've heard you say before that you are a writer who draws, is that a fair encapsulation? I think that's a word of everything that you do and are?

[00:03:55.3] AK: First of all, I primarily think of myself as a reader which is kind of a weird point to make but what I really love is I really love to read. I really love to read books and I really love to take notes and be like an armchair scholar in a way and professional writing in a lot of ways for me is a way for me to be a professional reader. That is an excuse for me to read a lot and in a way, my writing pays for my reading habit I guess.

And so, I'm trained as a writer. I went to school to learn how to write and I took a lot of writing workshops and a lot of English classes, a lot of classic classes in college and so that's really the primary identity of mine. And then the drawing and the visual part of it is something that I've always — I don't want to call it auxiliary but it's just that other toolkit that I have but I really consider myself a writer who draws and not an artist who writes.

[00:05:00.4] JG: How much do you read?

[00:05:03.2] AK: It depends. I would say probably anywhere from one to two hours a day which isn't that much but I would say probably one to two hours a day. I definitely read a lot less now I have children, maybe I do a lot less of everything now I do since I've had children but I've tried really hard to build reading into my routine.

For a while, when I come out of the office I would actually sit down and read instead of write but it's been hard. I think that anyone who is running their own business or trying to make a career out of what they do, it's hard to handle all the administrative stuff and also get your work done and so that's something that I'm always trying to work out in balance myself.

I would say reading goes in waves for me. Like when I'm working on a book really intensely, I'm probably not reading a lot just because I am trying to spend every single moment on output but when I am not working on a book which I'm not right now. I'm actually in between projects, that's when I read a ton and I think that as much as I'm a person who's a creature of habit and routine and the daily routine, I think there are seasons in creative work.

I think that people need to be really comfortable with knowing that, with knowing that sometimes you're going to be super productive and sometimes you're not and you just have to stay in there and let the season pass.

[00:06:42.5] JG: I appreciate you saying that. I've heard you before talk about routines and I don't know about you but this is the one question that I am most embarrassed to answer because people are like, "How do you spend your day?" And I always feel like the Austin Kleon answers are really good.

"Well, if I'm honest I wake up next to my wife and I start checking my e-mails and then she pushes me out of bed to go make pancakes for our toddler. Then I rush off to the office late and catch up on a phone call or waste time on the internet," and yeah but I hear you saying it's a fight and I resonate with that.

[00:07:20.3] AK: Well, how much time do you really need every day? That is something that I think that I don't want to keep talking about having children I feel, but when you have children, you really realize how much time you wasted when you didn't have them.

[00:07:36.0] JG: Yeah, that's true.

[00:07:36.9] AK: The unbelievable amount of time that people without children have but for me, I would say that I was always really inspired. I read Stephen King's book *On Writing* in college and I was really inspired by three hours a day, maybe in the morning. Someone like Elmore Leonard who's another kind of writing hero of mine, I mean he would write all day, just all day, nine to five.

But Stephen King, he writes like three or four hours in the morning and then he reads all afternoon. That's what he does and there's a great book called *Daily Rituals* by a guy named Mason Currey and I think what you find when you look at a lot of writers and artists routine is there's probably, I don't know, four good hours of really intense creative work that people have in them and the rest is just puttering and shuffling things around.

I think what's the most important though to understand is that creative work kind of requires a little bit of a ramp up and in terms of people who come out to the office and flip their computer on, drink their coffee and shuffle papers around and get in the zone. I think John Klee said he sets aside 90 minutes I think is what he sets aside where no one could get to him and he sits down and does his work.

But he is always saying that he takes 30 minutes to warm up and get into that kind of headspace and then the rest of the 60 minutes are his. Everyone is like, "Oh if I just had three minutes or three months and I move to Paris, I can get my novel done." Yeah, right. But yeah I mean I would probably say I would spend maybe two to three hours a day actually working and the rest is just admin.

I mean I've always aspired to John Water's routine when he says, "You know I make stuff up in the morning and I sell it in the afternoon," which I always loved but someone like Jonathan Latham, when he had kids he just gets up at three or four in the morning and he just writes for two or three hours and then his boys get up and he makes some breakfast and take them to school and I don't know what he does for the rest of the day, maybe take a nap, read or whatever.

I like to sleep too much, that's my problem and my youngest son is eight months old. So we're not getting that much sleep anyway. But yeah, again, seasons and I think really what's the most important instead of the amount of time you have is really the repetition is showing up every day. If I had a choice between having a full day on the weekend to work and an hour every day to work, I would pick the hour every day every time.

Setting aside a little chunk of time every day I think is way more powerful than having these big blocks of time freed up and of course that's because, it might be different if you are a welder or someone who's work required, you know, a potter or something. That's the thing about making all these general creativity advice is like you talk about what works for you and what works for writers and stuff.

And then you talk to a potter or something and they're like, "Well I have to stick things in the kiln and wait four hours to work the fire", "Oh shit wow. What do you do in these four hours?" And

they're like, "Exactly," and so everyone's routine is different. Everyone needs different amounts of time but your average writer is like, "Come on man, just do like the" — I forgot, which news anchor was it? He just goes in for an hour.

There is some news anchor who just goes to work an hour early before everyone else arrives and when everyone gets there, he just works for the rest of the day. That's it but it's the repeatable process of going to the same spot every day and trying to get the muse to visit you. What's that old line? It's like, "If you show up in the same place every day, she knows where to go."

[00:12:13.2] JG: Yeah.

[00:12:15.0] AK: Sometimes she shows up, sometimes she doesn't.

[00:12:17.9] JG: Well Stephen King, I love that book *On Writing* and he talks about the muse as like a construction worker like this blue collared guy and you're like his manager and he doesn't go to work unless you do like the boss is there.

[00:12:30.2] AK: Yeah, I like that.

[00:12:31.0] JG: I always love that analogy. Yeah, that's really interesting especially in light of what you do now and what you're known to do or at least what I understand, kind of your message and the people that you've reaching. You've become and I assume you would balk at this but you'd become the creativity guru and yet you are saying different strokes for different folks.

So I am wondering how do you do what you do? Which is you really write this really great applicable books on how to tap into your creativity and share it with the world and these very practical ways and they have been incredibly well received by the general market but I'm wondering who are you writing for when you think about this?

I think every writer knows they're afraid of being too specific that they're irrelevant. Every writers want to say, "I write for everybody." I mean that's what I want to say because the random person

says, “Well, what’s your target audience?” “You. You are my target audience. Go buy my book.” So we know we want to reach that target market but at the same time, we fear being irrelevant. Do you think about that when you sit down to write, “Who am I writing for?”

[00:13:48.1] AK: When I sit down, it just depends on what I’m writing. I mean I’m not a novelist so when I sit down to write a book, it’s tempting to do. Now, the kinds of books that I write like *Steal Like an Artist*, or *Show Your Work* or even the new journal, those are attempting to do something. They’re attempting to get a kind of reaction out of the reader.

Steal Like an Artist started out as a talk that I was giving the students and so that is a really simple book to write and mostly because it was mostly written already but really, *Steal Like an Artist* functioned as a what do I wish I had known when I was 19 about doing creative work? Really, the word creativity was not even — I probably spent zero percent of my time thinking about creativity when I wrote that book. In my mind, that book was about how you make a life as an artist.

That’s all *Steal Like an Artist* was and of course, you put the word “creativity” on the book and all of a sudden, it’s a creativity book and blah, blah, blah and creativity was inserted in that book during the project as a kind of a placeholder word for art. If you talk about art, people get thrown off. If you talk about creativity, all of the sudden some of the business people are like, “Oh okay,” and then if you call it innovation, they can charge three times that much, right?

[00:15:15.0] JG: Yeah.

[00:15:15.4] AK: So yeah, *Steal Like an Artist* came out and a couple of things happened with *Steal Like an Artist*. One, all of a sudden there was an audience, like holy-molly. All these people showed up. On *Show Your Work*, which is the follow up to *Steal Like an Artist* was me actively trying to, all of a sudden I was like, “Oh this is what I’m doing. I understand this now. That there is such a thing as a creativity section in a bookstore and there is a particular branch of, shudder to say it, self-help that these kinds of books existed and I have this audience.

So *Show Your Work* then, the impetus for that was all these people kept asking me like, “How did you do this? How did you get your stuff out there?” Every writer gets those questions when

you're at a Q&A. It's like, "How do you get published? How did you get your stuff out there?" And all of those questions are about self-promotion. They're all about marketing and putting yourself out there and they all pre-suppose that you have something worth sharing in the first place which is tricky.

So *Show Your Work* was very much me thinking about self-promotion and how much I hated the idea of self-promotion and what if you can write a book about self-promotion for people who hated the idea of self-promotion like I did? So that was easy because there was okay, well the audience for this book is people who have read *Steal Like an Artist* but I am skirting around your question now.

But really, what I'm trying to do more than anything is I'm trying to take things that I have because I think a lot of people when they read books on these subjects, they think that the people who are writing have it all figured out, that they've got to the top of the mountain and they've gone through the thing and they've come back with the two tablets of the 10 Commandments and like, "Here you go."

"I've been up the mountain and I have seen and brought back this message to you." For me, it's not that all. It's very much like, "I'm struggling with all these things and this is what I've learned so far and this is what I have to share with you." Like for example, *Steal Like an Artist* was what I wish I had known? And *Show Your Work* was what am I trying to figure out?

I'm trying to actively figure out and the question I was trying to figure out in *Show Your Work* is, how do you run this circus of keeping up your social media profiles and having a blog and answering e-mail and sending out your newsletter and all that crap that you're supposed to do now? How do you run that yourself while getting your work done? What is a sustainable system for getting that stuff done?

So that was the question on *Show Your Work* answered but again, I haven't answered your question like who do I write for, I don't know. I really don't know. I think for one thing because when you have a book that has reached as many people like *Steal Like an Artist* has, it could be high school art students, it could be preachers, it could be creative directors of some church somewhere.

It could be — I have heard from people who are working in a prison. I've heard from accountants, I've heard from lawyers, doctors. I don't know really but as far as voice goes I tend to write for again, not to steal Stephen King's message, I tend to write for my wife. I tend to write in a voice in which I think that my wife would read it and like it because she's my first reader and she's my barometer. I try to write things that would pass her muster.

[00:19:21.8] JG: Do you think that a writer can find her voice in isolation? Because what I hear you saying is, "I didn't really know who I was writing for until people started listening."

[00:19:33.1] AK: Yeah, I don't know how totally accurate that is. It's hard for me to reverse engineer. I mean I think that — I don't know, that problem of audience is one that I'm always struggling with because I never know whether to tell people to, I never know what the answer is because I think a lot of writers write for an optimal version of themselves.

Like, "Oh, well there's this great version of me I'm trying to write for" and there's a lot of writers that they figure, "Well if I write books that I want to read," which is something that I've told people is look at the world and think about the book that you wish existed and then think about of those. In a lot of ways, for writers, if you want to write books I very much think a bit as an, "What's missing from the shelves?"

Then out of that huge number of books of what's missing on the shelves, "What could I handle?" And then you write one of those books. That's how I see it and that in a certain sense is a way for me of attempting to find your work. It's to look out there and say, "What's everyone doing?" Or "What's everybody not doing?" And then, "What can I do that would fill some of that gap?"

But as far as voice in isolation, I don't think a writer ever is in isolation. For one thing, if you're any good as a writer, you're reading all the time and so those voices are swirling around with all the books that you're reading and you're lifting and borrowing and subconsciously taking in all those voices but then there is also the people in your life who are influencing you and inspiring you. If you have like a writer's group or something like that, that's great.

And then nowadays in the digital age, there's all the people that you follow online and that kind of thing. So I am mostly a big believer in I don't think that there is such a thing as the isolated lone genius that comes out of nowhere. I think even people like Beethoven. They are extremely talented but they're born in context, they're rich and ready for someone to nurture someone like him and his talents.

And so I am a big believer in what Brian Eno called scenius. It's like genius and what that is, it's the collective form of genius and that there is a scene or there is a network of people and that great ideas come from being part of one of those rich networks. I think part of the writer or the artist job is to find one of those really rich networks that will provide them with the juice and the support for them to do their work and to find their voice.

[00:22:33.6] JG: Awesome, could you talk personally about what that scenius look like for you. The chronology of this discussion is interesting. I kind of wanted to start here but this has been fun with where the conversation has taken us but I wonder if you can go back and say, "Here is where I got my start as a writer." You've hinted that the kind of books that you ended up writing may not have been what you intended or thought would come out of you.

Maybe I misheard that, but I'm always fascinated with it because I love that idea. I heard you talk about scenius in a talk at a conference that you did recently that I was at. I love that idea. I am obsessed with this idea of how creativity never happens in isolation and there's always a network of people and I believe that we have more access in those networks than we've ever had before because of the Internet, because of technology and because of all these great connecting tools. But it's always fascinating to hear for me how people get their start.

[00:23:32.3] AK: Yeah, so I grew up in a really small town in Southern Ohio and I didn't know any writers, didn't know any artists. I had some decent art teacher, I had a decent English teacher, took a lot of post-secondary courses at a branch college like a community college and then I went to a place called Miami University in Ohio which is kind of confusing but my life is full of confusing name situations.

[00:24:00.6] JG: Yeah. I was going to ask questions like tongue in cheek, "Was that also in Ohio? Ha-ha-ha."

[00:24:06.6] AK: Yeah. So at Miami, I fell into a group of fellows who were middle class wannabe intellectual kids like me who had grown up in Ohio and are looking for that kind of crew of intellectual, I guess we didn't use the word hipster back then but that was definitely what we were. We were trying and kind of pretentious and we were a gang. Because I think when you grow up, when I was growing up it's like if you didn't play football and we didn't have the Internet.

The Internet came very late in terms of in high school for me. The Internet came I want to say after I had my driver's license almost, kind of around then. Again, this is a rural area. I remember when my mom finally got a dial up internet at our house and it came with a little bit of web space and I immediately realized with the internet, "Oh you can be whatever you want to be on this thing." You can completely invent another you.

When you grew up in a small town, everyone knows you, everyone knows who your parents are, you're locked into whatever role you've acquired through the community or in high school or whatever but I knew online, "Hey, you can be whoever you want to be," and so I tinkered very early on with starting a website. So when I went to college, I fell in with these group of guys.

One of my friends wanted to be a writer, a lot them wanted to be academics themselves and a couple of them are really smart dudes but we had this gang that we started because we were all nerds and then all of a sudden we're at college. We're like, "Well we could be a gang," we can be these crew of dudes and I think we even had a little website for ourselves. It sounds incredibly geeky but this is pre-Facebook. Facebook hadn't even come around yet.

I remember one of us, one of the crew gave me their web space and their account information. I made a little stupid website for us and we would post pictures of our parties and stuff and this is ridiculous stuff but when I got to college I found what I was always looking for which is like a gang of people that liked what I liked and I had a couple of really good professors but then, the biggest leap for me came when I really realized, "Hey wait a minute, I can have a website. I can have my own space."

I remember registering, I think I registered austinkleon.com when I was in college and then when I got out of college, that was about 2005-2006 when blogs were just huge, like that's what you did and so when I got out of college, I had this great professor who said, "Don't go to grad school. Don't get your MFA. Just go out there, get a job and work for a while and see if you still want to write," which was amazing advice and I think everyone should follow that.

So I did. I got out, got a job at a library up in Cleveland. My wife is from Cleveland, she was my girlfriend at the time and we moved up to Cleveland. I got a part time job at a library. A public library working the reference desk and then I spent all of my time at home just monkeying around on my blog and reading and going to the library and looking up crazy books and stuff like that.

So the big leap for me was, when you go to college, when you take creative writing workshops, you either have to be a poet or a short story writer. There weren't a lot of non-fiction. I didn't get journalism at the time so I would have been way better served taking journalism courses. So I was trying to be a short story writer actually and I was in a couple of writing groups in Cleveland and I realized that I have no capacity for this.

I just don't have talent for this. I have no talent for invention whatsoever like in terms of inventing characters and giving them plots and having bad things happen to them and having them get out of it. I just don't have the imagination for it. I'm not even really sure I have the interest in it and certainly not now. I love fiction. I love to read novels but I'm not very good at that kind of writing. That was a huge, huge deal for me.

So what I realized after that is I have been drawing and writing and I got really into comics. I actually ran the graphic novel section of this library that I was in and I said, "Well maybe I could do comics." So I started drawing cartoons and comics and stuff and then I realized I was really into the Smoking Gun website which is this goofy website that post people's declassified FBI files and stuff like that and I was also really into Frank Warren's Post Secret website.

Which is where people write secrets on post cards and send them to Frank and he scans them and puts them on his blog and at the time that was new. Post Secret hadn't been around that long and I got very obsessed with this idea of, "Oh wait, you can put images on blogs," like

blogs can be whatever you want to be. You can have pictures and words together and I'm sure that if there are younger people listening to this, this has to sound so stupid.

Because now, if you're young and you're online you've got Instagram, you've got Tumblr but back then, first of all, it was hard to set up a blog. You had to sign up for one and if you're going to host on your own site, you had to know what you were doing. To set up a Word Press blog on your domain name is a big deal. Anyway, sorry this is going really long.

[00:30:20.7] JG: No, it's good. It's a story.

[00:30:22.3] AK: It was a big deal for me to figure out, "Wait a minute, you can put images on there," which means you might as well make some visual art and that's when the Blackout Poems came from because I would make those and I was just trying to come up with ideas for short stories and if your listeners don't know what the Blackout Poems are, what I do is I just take an article from the New York Times and I start crossing out some words and leaving words behind.

At the end, it looks like the CIA did Haiku on there, just like these little sayings and phrases that look like redacted government documents and when I did those, I thought they were writing exercises and my wife said, "Well why don't you just put them on your blog? They're visual and cool looking," and so I started doing that. So all of these is happening at the same time and just slowly overtime, it occurs to me, "Wait a minute, I don't have to worry about making books."

"If I make a book down the line, fine but I have this outlet now. I have this thing, this blog that anything I can think of to come up with, I can just put it on this thing and maybe it's a piece of fiction, maybe it's a poem, whatever I want to do I can put it on here and it works. Maybe I just want to write about a book I read, that's fine," and so it became clear to me that I don't have to worry too much about getting published or anything like that.

I can just have this blog and I think my plan was not that I really had one, I think my plan was well, if I'm cool and interesting and do enough stuff on this blog, people get to know me and then maybe a book will come out of it at some point but I don't even really think I thought that far

ahead of it because I was thinking, “Hey if I had a cool job that I can just go to and just have my blog on the side, that sounds great.” I did not have ambitions.

“Now, I’m going to have an etsy store and sell my art,” I didn’t have any of those ambitions. I was just like, “I’m going to have a good desk job, day job and just have this blog and do that,” and so that’s what I did. What happened eventually is, I had no formal web design training but I had monkeyed around on my blog enough. I talked my way into a job down here in Texas at the University Of Texas School Of Law. My wife had gotten into grad school down here.

I talked my way into a web designer position down here and the web master at UT Law, he took me under his wing and taught me web design and my plan for that was, “Well I’m just going to learn how to do the internet, how to really make a website and really making it work and stuff.” So everything that I was learning at that job, I was taking home at night and making my website better. Then I just kept drawing and being interested and sharing stuff.

Then one of the things that I started doing was I would draw at life events. So I would go to Austin say limits tapings and I would draw the bands and then the director of film here at South by Southwest, Champ Pearson, she was really nice and gave me an invitation to come and draw because she followed my blog. She gave me an invitation to South by Southwest to draw and draw panels and stuff so I started drawing panels.

Pretty soon, the thing I realized very early on is that people when you draw them, they get really excited. Everyone loves to be drawn and so I would hear from these people that I would draw and that’s how I got known for stuff and they would link to me and that kind of things. Those things kept happening and then I think MPR or a couple of big blogs picked up my Blackout Poems and then that’s when I heard from an editor, Harper Collins.

Who said, “Have you ever thought about a book?” And that’s how my publishing career got started but Newspaper Blackout came out and it’s a poetry book. It came out and got really great reviews. I was reviewed in really good notices, New Yorker, Wall Street Journal, New York Magazine, all that stuff but it just didn’t sell because it’s a poetry book and it was a bestseller poetry wise which means nothing.

[00:34:54.1] JG: Yeah, right.

[00:34:54.8] AK: And so I didn't quit my day job or anything. I didn't go on a book tour for that or anything and I really just thought after Newspaper Blackout came out, I felt, "Well this is fine." I would always really respect people like Phillip Larkin or William Carlos Williams or Wallace Stevens, these poets who had day jobs that they were white collar, boring jobs that these guys did and then came home and wrote poetry. I just thought that's what I would do.

So what I did was then I took all of marketing and promotion I've done for Newspaper Blackout, I discovered that a lot of my favorite cartoonist online had been copywriters at one time. My friend, Hugh McCloud used to be a copywriter. My friend Jessica Hagy, she used to be a copywriter and I realized, "Oh maybe I could be a copywriter, maybe that's a way that I can make a living."

So my friend Hawk Thompson down here in Austin, he got me a job copywriting and digital advertising. That's what I was doing when I did the *Steal Like an Artist* talk. So that was really long and winded, I'm really sorry.

[00:36:05.7] JG: No, no.

[00:36:06.5] AK: It's pretty much the whole but I guess the point of all of that is I hear from people now. See back then, you just muddled your way. I don't know, I sound like a 100 years old or something. I'm 32 years old but for me, there was no clear path. Now, people think, "Oh, well I'm going to get a big blog and then I'm going to get a book deal and then I'll be some rockstar," or something.

That didn't exist. That didn't really exist yet. My goal is I am going to have a place. I am going to stake a claim online. I am going to have my own turf and I am going to explore what's interesting and exciting to me and I am going to learn how to do things in public and if I share enough, if I am interesting enough and helpful enough to other people, eventually good things will happen to me. That was really the spirit I wanted to have and share your work.

[00:37:21.9] JG: How long did that take from starting a blog and having that idea in the back of your head like maybe if I did this right, I could get published and you said, “I don’t even know if it was that well-formed,” but I remember thinking of those things too. I felt the same thing. T.S. Elliot was a banker and I remember a reader wrote me one time and said, “Hey, how do you get to be a novelist or a professional writer if your last name isn’t Tolkien?”

I was like, “Tolkien was a professor. He had a day job,” and so I assumed that that’s the way it would go for me but I remember back in my mind, there was this ridiculous part of me that was like, “Yeah but wouldn’t it be great if” — how long did that start to “finish process” take?

[00:38:11.0] AK: Well, let’s just talk about timeline. I got out of college in 2005, I started a blog in October 2005. In 2008, three years after, I got my first big and actually it’s pretty quick. Three years later, I got the call from the editor and then my first book came out in 2010. So that’s five years. That’s not very long actually. It happened quick for me.

Then 2012, *Steal Like an Artist* came out so that’s seven years after I started my blog but I quit my job from *Steal Like an Artist* not because I had so much money that I could. I was like, “Oh it would go on forever” I quit my job for *Steal Like an Artist* because my company was up for sale and things were very uncertain as to whether anyone was going to have a job.

I asked them to give me unpaid leave. I said, “Look, I need to go on this book tour. I need to give this book everything that I’ve got. I just need two months. Can you give me two months and I will come back at the end?” And just come back to work and that wasn’t going to happen and so I quit. I was very clear to people when I quit because one of the big points in *Steal Like an Artist* is keep your day job.

I was very clear with people. I’m not quitting because I’m so brave and I’m taking this big risk. I am quitting because my wife gets health insurance from the University and we’ve saved a ton of money and we don’t have children yet and I’m giving this all I’ve got. Then, *Steal Like an Artist* was not an immediate hit. It sold steadily at first.

Steal Like an Artist took off several months down. It was a word of mouth thing and *Steal Like an Artist* never got the big reviews. It never got the huge like Wall Street Journal or New Yorker

notices. It never got any of that because it's not a highfalutin book enough for them. The New York Times now they call it advice, how to and miscellaneous.

That's the list because what the New York Times did was they were having books like the Twilight fan guide or whatever. It was on the non-fiction list because it was out selling the bestselling non-fiction book where these chinsy gift books and so the New York Times was like, "Well we can't have that," and so they've made this how-to advice miscellaneous list which was *Steal Like an Artist* was on.

[00:41:06.8] JG: To beat the beating.

[00:41:08.2] AK: Yeah, not out there I think but it's like, "Yeah, so what?" That's seven years and I have been, let's see, it's 2015, yeah. I have been blogging for 10 years and that just seems so quick to me but then I talk to young people and you tell them like, "Well give it a decade" and they're like, "What do you mean give it a decade?" Because I'm like, "Look, this happened quick for me and I was super lucky."

I made all the right choices and got all the right breaks and it happened fast and it's been 10 years and people are like, "Oh 10 years?" And you're thinking to yourself like you think about some of these great painters who didn't do their best work until they were in their 50's and as a culture, we have completely lost that sense. For one thing, we don't have the support systems anymore.

We don't have a lot of the kind of cushy, there was a sweet spot in our post-war where maybe you were on the GI bill and you can go to a really good art school or there were some good grants and a little bit more support for artist. It was a little bit cheaper. There was this golden age of middle class for artist and that's gone away now.

So whenever I hear artists complain about how hard it is to make a living, I think to myself, well it's hard to make a living no matter who you are. In this country, it is not easy to make a living regardless unless you're in finance or one of this big jobs. I mean your average middle class person is squeezed in a way they haven't been in a really long time.

I always think that artist do themselves a disservice. Artist and writers when they advocate for support for the arts and for writing, I think what they need to be advocating for is universal health care for everyone or universal income or just these basic support systems that in this country would help everyone and not just writers and artist but I'll step down off my soapbox now.

[00:43:31.5] JG: I've got two more questions. One is it's great, when people ask me, "What's your story?" I'm like, "Oh boy, here we go," so that's why I asked for, you know?

[00:43:44.6] AK: Yeah.

[00:43:46.1] JG: So what does work look like to you today? Because you said don't quit your day job, you did and I am always fascinated with this because this is one of those questions that I'm embarrassed to answer because it's not writing eight hours a day and as we've already established, you don't have to do that and as you said, even writing four or five hours a day, I have found reading memoir after memoir.

All these honest recollections of writers who later on say they lied anyway like Stephen King talking about getting sober and then really getting sober which was fascinating but yeah, that's rare to write all day.

[00:44:24.0] AK: And for your listeners, I actually find Stephen King's son, Joe Hill has really internalized a lot of that stuff that he writes about and Joe is actually a great person to follow on Twitter. Talk about a guy who has figured out how to crank out novels. I think he's a really interesting person to follow online. I'd like to give him a plug. We're kind of Twitter buddies so.

[00:44:51.3] JG: That's @joe_hill?

[00:44:52.4] AK: Yeah, @joe_hill on Twitter. Once in a while, he will get fired up about process stuff. He's a big hand writing guy and writing by hand and notebook type dude and he's a good guy and his books are great.

[00:45:08.2] JG: Yeah, so what does work look like for you because I've heard you say things like, "I do my work in the morning and then I do admin in the afternoon" and you're between books and you've got the *Newspaper Blackout* book and then you've got *Steal Like an Artist*, *Show Your Work* and now, the *Steal Like an Artist Journal* but you're not working on anything right now.

I think you just finished a book tour. I know you're speaking and doing stuff like that. I know that everyday can be different but what does work look like to you? What do you think of as work other than making pancakes or whatever for your kids? What is schedule and rhythm look like?

[00:45:43.3] AK: Work is I get out to the studio probably at 10 or 11 and I go in for dinner at five. I know that's going to sound like, "Geez, I want that job," to everyone that is listening but the thing that my wife likes to remind me whenever I'm getting down on myself, she is really good with me and that she says, "You never turn off."

She's like, "Every single moment of the day even if you're "relaxing" you're on Twitter. You're like reading a million articles. You're dumping stuff in a word doc to put in your newsletter later or you're taking notes in some book." She's like, "You know other people that go to work and they leave it at the end of the day."

You go to work at eight and then you leave at 5:30 and you're done. You go home and you play PlayStation or enjoy a beer, you watch House Hunters or whatever. So when I say that I'm in the office from 10 to five, that's just when I'm in the office. That's not even necessarily when I'm working because my work life and my play life is so murky and that can have a lot of challenges to it.

It's just really challenging not to get burned out. I come out to the studio like 10 or 11. I get out here, I will throw the computer on so I have some tunes and then I will make one of my Blackout Poems or something like that and I will sit down. Depending on whatever I have, I usually do e-mail bin. I try to rip through my inbox, get that done and out of the way.

Then if it's a newsletter day, I will work on the newsletter and if I'm working on a project or a talk or something, I will try to do that raw intense creative work like writing a talk or coming up with

book stuff but then, a lot of the day is like, “Oh God, I have to make this graphic for the workman’s doing an easel for the Barnes and Noble promotion.” They want me to look over this easel they’re doing so I have to approve that and then so and so. What’s maybe on their podcast?

[00:48:05.0] JG: I hate those, those are so annoying.

[00:48:06.8] AK: It’s like a bunch of admin work. It’s a bunch of keeping the gears of the business running like all speakers will go, “Hey,” — oh sorry.

[00:48:20.7] JG: Hang on a second. That sounds like an actual telephone like with a line and like a non-digital touch pad.

[00:48:31.7] AK: Yeah, that’s what it is. Yeah.

[00:48:35.7] JG: Have you always had that or did you get that to do radio interviews or something?

[00:48:39.4] AK: Radio interviews.

[00:48:40.2] JG: Yeah, all right.

[00:48:40.8] AK: Stupid, all these idiotic radio stations, they want you to have a hard line and I’m like, “Okay, well the hard line is now a voice over IP.”

[00:48:51.4] JG: Yeah, right.

[00:48:52.4] AK: This stupid phone that’s in here that’s like a real phone is just hooked up to a modem and you’re just like, “Just Skype me dude.” What we’re doing right now sounds so much better than a radio interview but they’re still in the dark ages that way so yeah, I have a phone line. If I’m on a book tour I will do radio interviews or something.

Anyway, a lot of it is okay, whatever you have to get done creative. I come in and I'm like, "Whatever I have to get done creatively," and that means making stuff. Whatever has to get made today, I do that first and then I switch over to admin and if I get admin done, then I can have fun time. I can read or I can collage or go back to all the stuff.

That's basically my process. You get in, you do what you have to do, what you have to make and then you go and you do admin work and then you go back and then you might do that three times by the time your day is up. So that's pretty much it.

[00:50:00.4] JG: I'm going to ask you a question and this is all self-therapy. I'm just dealing with my own demons.

[00:50:06.9] AK: Okay, sure.

[00:50:07.6] JG: So hear it from that perspective because I talk about process and writing and I share that with other people but I'm wondering because I hear this often so this is my prologue to the question. Do you ever feel like a fake for talking about creativity and making a living talking about art and not doing it or not doing it as much as "real artist" or real creative writer would do? Do people ever throw that criticism that way? Because I hear it often and sometimes it messes with me and I'm wondering if you deal with that and how?

[00:50:49.4] AK: Sure, of course. You think I do this for fun? That's the one thing and to be perfectly honest for everyone listening, do you think I started out and want to be a self-help author?

[00:50:59.5] JG: Right.

[00:51:00.2] AK: Because I get e-mails from these people who are like, "I'd love to write self-help books," and I'm like, "What is wrong with you? Why is that your ambition?" My ambition when I was younger is I want to write books that people want to read. I want to make cool books, you know what I mean? The whole creativity guru thing that is my day job.

People are like, "Oh you quit your day job." No, no, no I have a different day job now and what the hope is, is that by me talking about creativity that actually funds my own projects. So that is my day job. It is not my passion. I like it. The analogy that I think of the most is the novelist that teaches in a MFA program. There is some novelist that love teaching and teaching does a lot for them.

But then there's a lot of novelist that they're like, "I teach because I have to. That's how I get health insurance and how pay my bills because my books certainly aren't doing it," but what they do is they get good at it. They take on a teaching job because they have to and then they get good at it because it's their job and then it starts feeding them.

Not just physically but spiritually and intellectually and you will find that in a lot of work. That you are stuck in a certain kind of work and then you figure out how to get really good at it and then it becomes rewarding. For me, it's always in the back of my mind but the interesting thing that I've decided about it is that, Lady Gaga couldn't teach you this stuff because Lady Gaga is too busy being Lady Gaga.

It wouldn't be in her interest to write a blog post about song writing, you know what I mean? It just wouldn't be and the people who are firing on big time, it requires a certain amount of left brain in this for lack of a better word. Basically, the way I see myself is, there are people and what I'm doing right now is I'm pulling at the ceiling.

So there is people way up there and then there's people at a about chest high right now that are down here and they want to be way up there, right? I'm in the middle. I'm sitting there and I'm saying, "Hey, I've studied how these people up here work and I've tried to emulate and do certain things in my own work and done okay but if you want to get up here or you either want to get towards that, this is what you can do."

So that to me feels very much like teaching. It feels like, the only way I'm comfortable doing what I do is to think about myself as a teacher and even better, as a fellow student. As a fellow student that just studies harder and shares more than your average student but I am totally sensitive to that. The fact that I couldn't, if I really tried to make a living out of Blackout Poetry, are you kidding me?

You know what I mean? That is where I was but I feel like I've always tried to be really clear with people about that. I was like, "Look, this is what I've figured out and this is what I'm figuring out," and I think that if you don't drink your — I think the problem with a lot of these so-called gurus is that they just drink their own Kool Aid. That it's very easy to become this person who's like Mr. Creativity or whatever.

They're just up there and they just start saying ridiculous things and worst of all, you get to be somebody who's just on the conference circuit or whatever and you have no connection to actually doing this kind of work anymore and you know those guys. They have been giving the same talk for 10 years and they are still speaking about the art of innovation or whatever.

They're out there but it's real and buoy for them that they can pull that off and stuff but then I meet somebody like one guy I met recently that I thought had a great thing going was a guy named Tom Kelly. Tom Kelly runs IDO with his brother David and Tom does the speaking stuff on the side. His main gig is running IDO.

But the thing that Tom told me is, "Every five or 10 years, I have all these material build up because I am paying around creative people all day and we always have new problems and we always have new clients and new stories and so I just collect all these things every five or 10 years, put down a new book and then I go around and give talks about it."

I'm like, "You know that to me, that's someone who's still in the trenches." He's still in contact with what it's like to be doing work and stuff like that. So that's what you have to figure out. You have to figure out a way that you aren't just talking about it and not doing it and that's really important and I think whenever you get to that point where you feel like you're talking about it more than doing it, well then it's time to do something fun. I hit that point, I took a vacation to Rhode Island recently with my family.

[00:56:38.7] JG: As one does.

[00:56:39.7] AK: Yeah, right. "Summering in New England." I love the word "summering" as a verb that to me seems like the most like — anyway but we went up there and I took two weeks

off which I've never done. I have never taken that much time off from everything and I came back and that's when I started doing a new version of the *Blackout Poems* which is I started using a razor blade instead of a marker.

I started making this funky pot bout cutout poems and that was sheerly a boredom thing. I was just like, "I'm bored." I went on vacation and I was like, "I'm bored." I haven't done anything interesting in forever. I need to go back and do something interesting and that's when those things happen. In a certain way, you have to hit rock bottom and say, "I got to go do something" and just put more effort into it.

I think the sad thing is and I want to be encouraging to people. If they have dreams, if they know that they really want to do something for a living and they are trying to get there, great. Keep going but I would really caution people. I think we live in this culture now that's like do what you love and make a living doing what you love.

Like, "Oh making six figures a year off your Etsy store," that seems to be like the highest peak of existence and I would caution everyone to think very clearly and carefully about whether you want to make a living off the thing that you love because when the thing that keeps you alive spiritually becomes the thing that keeps you alive literary, often times you have to find something else that keeps you alive spiritually.

So it can be a very tricky thing and my friend Hugh McCloud says, "Beware of turning hobbies into jobs because it's not as easy and free as you would think it would be." It's a lot of work and you never know how you'll feel about the thing you do on the other side.

[00:58:50.0] JG: Yeah, as Christopher Marlowe or maybe Angelina Jolie said, "That which nourishes me destroys me."

[00:59:00.8] AK: That's dark man. We went Goth at the end of that. I love it.

[00:59:04.1] JG: That's her tattoo on her back.

[00:59:07.0] AK: Is that really?

[00:59:07.8] JG: Well because I have peered that Angelina Jolie's back many times.

[00:59:12.0] AK: Because I have seen her at the pool in Vegas though.

[00:59:15.1] JG: She's a neighbor. Yeah, that's what's on her, yeah anyway, I found that quote somewhere and I was like, "Angelina Jolie did not say that," because it was attributed to her and it was Christopher Marlowe apparently.

[00:59:26.5] AK: That's hilarious but more than anything, I just want to back up and for people who are out there and they are trying to do something, I think instead of making a living doing what you love because that is the new capitalism right? The artisan maker thing, I would turn it around and I would say, "What can you do for a living that means you get to spend the most quality time doing what you like?"

So what I mean by that is, it might be that working a state job with very strict hours turns out to be the thing that allows you to spend the most good time on your writing, you know what I mean? It might be that a certain kind of career means that you actually get to spend more time being creative because if you're running some etsy store and you've got to fill 40 orders a week or whatever, it might turn into more admin work than anything else, you know what I'm saying?

[01:00:34.0] JG: Oh yeah.

[01:00:34.5] AK: I would like to turn the conversation around and say, "How can you set up your life in a way in which you're spending the maximum amount of time doing the creative work that you like to do? The important work that you do?" How can you engineer your life in which you get to sit in a place every day and do the thing and you feel like you really need to do?

That's the question not whether you can make a living from it but how can you establish that time, space and materials to get that work done. I think if you focus on that instead of, "How am I going to become this tremendously successful writer or artist?" I think if you focus more on like, "What can I do in my life to make sure that I get to write every day?" I think that's healthier and I think it will make you happier and I think it's just a more obtainable goal.

[01:01:28.8] JG: This jives with a book that I think you and I both read which is called *The Gift* by Lewis Hyde which really spouses this idea of maybe the best thing for you to do is not go try to sell your art directly to the market place and he talks about art as a commodity. He did a cool little infographic and I'll link to that because it was a great little mind mat.

[01:01:52.7] AK: Yeah, it's been a while since I read that book but I think that everyone who's trying to balance art and commerce in their life needs to read that. I think I'd like to make a pitch for a fictional version of the gift. One of the best books I've read about art and commerce...

[01:02:10.7] JG: I think that would be great. I'd like to make a pitch for a book that I have written.

[01:02:14.0] AK: I'd like to make a book that I wrote that you could buy on — no, I read a book called *Market Day* by a cartoonist names James Sturm and it's a short, what we would call a graphic novel now, really a long comic. Beautiful, beautifully drawn book and it's about a rug maker. He takes his new rug into town and he tries to sell it and it's a really simple beautiful meditation on what it is to try to sell your soul.

To sell this thing that you've made with your hands and that you love and that you put all the sweat and energy into. Man, I would love to make a pitch for that. It's called *Market Day*. Particularly if you don't like comics or read comics, it's a beautiful way to get into that format and that's the fictional version than Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*. It's not an easy book to read.

[01:03:10.3] JG: No, it's very academic, yeah.

[01:03:11.8] AK: It's very academic and it is hard to read and I always wonder if maybe Lewis could do, I don't want to say like a dumbed down version but more of a straight forward but that's not what the book is about again but I think if you can get through it, that book has a lot to teach and to think about.

[01:03:33.9] JG: Yeah, anybody who endeavors to connect art and anthropological research about gift societies is in for an interesting journey. I would like to make a pitch for the *Steal Like an Artist Journal and Notebook*, the creative kleptomaniacs Austin's new book.

[01:03:50.9] AK: Thank you very much.

[01:03:53.2] JG: Which is really cool. If you are unfamiliar with what Austin does, he illustrates his own writing and it is a notebook. So don't buy this book to read. Buy this book to do creative work and there's all kinds of great ideas in there about how to put together a swipe file, how you steal ideas from other sources and I really do love how you do this Austin.

It shows that you are well read, always referencing lots of input that you're gathering and this notebook will help you keep track of that and curate some of the best work that you are consuming and put it together and hopefully interesting in creative ways and share it with the world. Austin, thank you so much for the gift and incredibly generous amount of time that you gave us. I really appreciate it.

[01:04:36.9] AK: Jeff it was my pleasure. Thanks for having me on.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[01:04:40.0] JG: Well that was my conversation with Austin Kleon. I hope you enjoyed it. I hope it encouraged you that pursuing a creative career is a challenge and that if you're in the midst of, "How do I make a living out of this and how do I make time to be creative and how do I do not lose my mind in doing this?" I hope it encourages you.

I hope that it gave you some perspective and also gave you some hope that if you're in the midst of those struggles like Austin is, like I am, then you're not disqualified from thinking of yourself as a professional artist or creative or a writer or whatever it might be. So that's how I felt leaving this and I hope you felt the same.

Thanks for listening to The Portfolio Life. If you enjoyed this, I would certainly appreciate a review. That helps us reach more listeners and helps us grow the audience which is good for

everybody and mostly my ego but also good for other things. I hope this was helpful to you continuing the work of building your own portfolio.

Thanks. Have a great day.

[END]