

## **Damn the Neuroses! Full Speed Ahead! Or, Thoughts on the Free Lance Life**

**by A. D. Coleman**

Is freelancing a psychiatric syndrome?

To my astonishment, that was the title of an unusual article I came across in the pages of an irregular publication issued by a graphic-arts workshop in New York City.<sup>1</sup> Its thesis was that freelancing is an inherently neurotic activity and occupation. The goal of its author — identified as an "MD, Psychiatrist, and Psychoanalyst" who, according to my phone book, both lives and practices the "talking cure" in a comfortable lower-Fifth-Avenue setting — was to persuade as many freelancers as he could reach to find regular full-time employment.

A few excerpts from the article will indicate the author's overall tone and attitude.

" . . . I have found that in general the freelancers I have been exposed to, fell within the entity of neurosis. I would admit exceptions, naturally . . . The origin of the term, as seen in a good dictionary, is provocative: A mercenary soldier (a knight) in the Middle Ages. Despite the phallic significance, the term has persisted throughout the years. Wouldn't an old-fashioned term like *tinker* or *mercenary* have served just as well? No, because the strongest feeling one gets from a freelancer today is his or her consciousness of being an outsider, and somewhat shady. Almost like he was doing something he was not supposed to do. . . .

"I must say, I don't personally envy a freelancer. His life is hard and uncertain. Let me make some quick psychological assumptions which might stir up some resistance, resentment, or controversy, but on the other hand might be helpful to freelancers in understanding themselves. . . . Though his courage in confronting a new situation so often may be admirable, he may

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<sup>1</sup> The article in question, by Warren Kronenberg, appeared in the Winter 1980 issue of *The Flyer*, published by the GAP Workshop in New York City.

need these frequent confrontations to support a powerful developmental character programming. As an outsider, for example, he can prove to himself that his sexual identity is masculine, and as a by-product that his sexual drives are not incestuous. . . .<sup>2</sup>

"The constant need to show a portfolio reveals some more or less strong exhibitionistic impulses. Showing the portfolio is like saying, 'Here, this is my intimate self. I'm not afraid of your looking at me.' Whereas the truth is that the individual is confronting his greatest fear, which is, being seen in his natural and tabooed state. He thus proves that he has no aggressive or sexual aim to cover up his guilt about thoughts of just those things. If he took a steady job, then he would be found out and suffer the (imagined) consequences. But as a freelancer he can fool his temporary employer and co-workers, which if read as substitute family makes apparently good sense.

"The above are just some of the psychological comments why some gifted artists remain in the lowly status of freelancers all their lives. I personally think that freelancing is the most insecure and unsatisfactory way of making a living that our society has to offer. . . ."

The publication of such a glib, superficial and ill-considered "psychoanalytic" attack on freelance activity beneath a sensationalized headline was obviously intended as a provocative act; I found myself impelled to respond. A great many of my professional colleagues and close friends — artists, writers, photographers and others — have chosen to exist in what this remarkable diagnosis so condescendingly calls a "lowly status," and they don't strike me as inherently any more neurotic than the average late-twentieth-century American.

I've made my living as a freelance writer in New York City for seventeen years, so I can speak with some grounding in personal experience on this subject. There have been periods when the bulk of my writing was done for one or two

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<sup>2</sup> The good doctor's assumption that all free lances are male is sociologically most naïve, but psychologically most revealing.

primary outlets (the *Village Voice*, the *New York Times*, *Camera 35*); stretches when I've concentrated my efforts on the production of books; and intervals during which I've contributed pieces to a diversity of publications in a relatively irregular fashion.

I don't share the doctor's bias toward conformity, office jobs, or the therapeutic establishment's primary goal of normalcy. As a freelance writer with an area of specialization (media criticism), I do feel that it's valuable to have one or two primary outlets for my work — because that's essential to building an audience, sustaining an ongoing train of thought, and developing a set of reference points in a dialogue between myself and my readership.

But that doesn't mean that you have to be on anyone's payroll. And to choose not to be a full-time corporate employee is hardly sufficient evidence that one "fell within the entity [sic] of neurosis." (Whatever neurosis may be, an "entity" it ain't.)

The proffered "etymological" explication of *free lance* is fundamentally erroneous. The term is not, nor has ever been, an automatic synonym for either *mercenary* or *tinker*. The *tinker* was an itinerant mender of pots and pans, usually unskilled and often incompetent (hence the derogatory usage, *tinkering*). The *mercenary* was a soldier of fortune, available for hire to the highest bidder. Both of these are terms of opprobrium.

On the other hand, the free lance — according to Webster's — is "a person who acts on his own responsibility, without regard to party lines or deference to authority." One can see why many psychotherapists would disapprove of such a stance; it is indeed the position which the doctor describes as that of the "outsider." But it is in no sense "shady," except to a conformism-oriented mind. The posture of the free lance is, at its best, anti-authoritarian, self-sustaining, and independent. To suggest that it is equivalent to the mercenary's amoral willingness to espouse any cause if the price is right or to the tinker's lack of significant craft abilities is inaccurate, even insulting.

Equally questionable is the subsequent assertion that "the freelancer can at times produce inferior work, perhaps to show he doesn't care." The exact opposite

is generally the case. The freelancer's reputation is on the line with every piece of work. A job badly done will preclude future income from the source — or, at best, will result in a client's demand that the work be redone *at the freelancer's expense*. The employee is in a better position to slip through a mediocre effort — and, even if the work does not pass muster, gets the employee chewed out, and needs redoing, the employee will be paid for his or her time on revisions.

The good doctor's closing statement, expressing his hope that his article will be "helpful in getting one or two individuals to think about moving out of [free lance] status," makes it clear that he thinks the freelance life is bad for people: unenviably "hard and uncertain." The life that he does think is good for people is described both explicitly and implicitly throughout the article: soft, certain, secure, free from anxiety, and employed full-time by someone else ( or some corporation) so that their economic needs are dependably filled.

In short, our healer proposes that people are best off when their condition is that of children within a solvent nuclear family: he recommends striving for the status of the worker-drone who, safe in the bosom of an office "family," is presumably free from worry over where his/her next meal will come from and shielded from the stresses of competition in the marketplace.

What a bizarre perversion of psychiatry — prescribing infantile agoraphobia as a remedy for independence! Here is a prime example of what Phillip Rieff laments so damningly as "the triumph of the therapeutic"<sup>3</sup> — the betrayal of Freud's analytic ideal, the conversion of psychiatry into a substitute religion aimed at making people "feel good."

Full-time white-collar work surely offers no sanctuary from psychic strain — witness the high incidence of ulcers, alcoholism, nicotine and drug addiction, nervous breakdown, divorce, and suicide in the white-collar ranks. And it provides no protection, in the long run, against the inherent perils of earning a living in a capitalist system: full-time workers are fired, laid off, passed over for promotion, manipulated, used as pawns in interoffice politics, often underpaid and sometimes

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<sup>3</sup> Rieff, Philip, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

"even cheated" by their employers.

The fact is that, in the amoral structure of the corporate state, all workers — full-time or otherwise — are freelancers *de facto*, if not *de jure*; the corporate mentality takes no responsibility for its cogs, and virtually anyone who works within it may find him- or herself out on the street at a moment's notice, looking for the next job. Effective freelancing — that is, surviving and thriving in that reality — involves discarding one's illusions about the corporate state and trading off certain fringe benefits (major medical insurance, expense accounts, paid secretarial help) against others (setting your own hours, turning down jobs that don't use your talents well or that you find morally repugnant, selecting and overseeing your own projects).

I would be the last to suggest that freelance living is for everyone, or that there is no price attached to the decision to take on that status. Certainly there is, as there is whenever one chooses any option and lets the alternative(s) pass. But economic and psychic insecurity are endemic to capitalist society; indeed, President Reagan's proposed elimination of the minimum wage would put every job on a continual auction block. Under such circumstances, I would suggest that freelancers might well be better prepared to cope and even get ahead than those who are habituated to "permanent and less insecure positions."

I would never claim that either full-time employment or freelancing is psychologically healthier. That depends entirely on the makeup of the individual; it is simply a set of options. Neither of these can or should be thought of as inherently "neurotic." Nor is paying the price implicit in one's choice "neurotic." Football and basketball players generally end up with damaged knees; women who decide to have large families usually acquire stretch marks. But deciding to play professional sports or to bear many children is not neurotic, even if some of the consequences thereof are negative.

Admittedly, I'm a layman with only a little formal education in psychology, but I disagree strongly with the definition of neurosis proposed by this psychoanalyst. Neurosis, as I understand it, does not consist of choosing one or another way of making a living, nor of paying the inevitable price for one's choice.

Rather, neurotic behavior would be (a) consistently failing to examine the consequences of one's alternatives before making one's choices, and/or (b) complaining endlessly about the predictable consequences of one's choices after making them.

Perhaps it is the latter forms of behavior which led the doctor to conclude that the freelancers he has "been exposed to, fell within the entity of neurosis." Given the biases and prejudices which resound throughout the doctor's piece, however, I would guess that his diagnosis of their neurotic tendencies had very little to do with their choice of freelancing. Indeed, I'd be willing to wager that the doctor rarely, if ever, finds someone in his office who is *not* neurotic, regardless of occupation. People who aren't neurotic aren't prone to visit psychiatrists, for one thing; and for another, the quickest way for any creative and independent person living in a troubled society to catch a severe case of neurosis is to step through the office door of a psychiatrist who is committed to the advocacy of conformism and who offers "quick psychological assumptions" in print.

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