

# Reflections From a Career Journey



Kim A Page

## University of dreams..

The '*University of Dreams*' is an American summer internship program that was founded to inspire students to pursue their dreams in their desired career field. The students are invited to visit a foreign city and during a 6-week program they are placed in an internship at a company. Every week an inspirational guest-speaker is invited to come and talk to the students. To prepare the speech the speakers are asked to answer the following questions:

- How did you get to where you are today?
- What are the keys to your success?
- What advice would you give the students?

I'm honored to be your guest-speaker tonight at The University of Dreams.

Truth be told, you are already more advanced with your studies than I was at your age. I was a confused college dropout at 20 and it took me 12 years to finish my Bachelor Degree that could have taken three years to complete. I spent my twenties moving from city to city, from country to country, doing all kinds of weird stuff that had no career-connection whatsoever, while taking on unqualified jobs to get by.

Today I am enjoying the most exciting career I can imagine. There are no degrees in what I do so far, so I created it myself, using my own life as a mould to pass on the tools and experiences I have gathered and lived. I am my own boss, I get to meet new people from different countries and worlds; and the best of it all – I am still learning and expanding my horizons every day.

My clients are people. Individuals making their way as project managers in WHO of United Nations, as finance experts in international banking, as architects, teachers and students and many other profiles - and I collaborate with five business universities in Barcelona and Copenhagen.

What you might want to know is  
– how did a confused college dropout get here?

I will answer by telling you three stories from my life:

## The first story is about becoming oneself

When I was 22 years old I was studying creative writing in Sweden. It was 1989, the year the Berlin-wall fell, and without knowing much of what it was all about, we followed the news closely. A few friends from the school and myself decided to celebrate New Years Eve in the heart of Europe to taste our share of the magic that was happening.

So when midnight struck that year, I was standing by the Berlin-wall, watching the crowd that was pouring out of what had been the East, people screaming and celebrating around me in a way I had never experienced before. I realized that life was so much bigger than my little writing classes in protected Sweden and that I had to come back. When I got back to Sweden two days later, I dropped out of this school too, saved money for a few months and got on a train with my suitcase. I was dead scared. This time I was alone, and I had no idea of what I was going to do or what I was looking for. I only knew that I had to go. I had planned to stay for two months. I stayed for two years.

So why did I go? And why did I stay? An inner voice kept telling me, that I couldn't leave before I knew why I had come. And after my two years I knew - I needed to go Berlin to become myself.

In Berlin I met the guitarist who made me a singer. I mingled with the sub-cultures, learning how diverse human behavior can be. In this city I woke up to see that my own problems were not only my own, but part of a bigger picture. From being a Scandinavian I turned European, but more than anything I turned into myself.

And this being oneself is what we bring along when we create our careers. The world is full of people filling out roles, being numbers in a system, struggling to be what we call professional. The interesting thing is that we cannot take the lead before we have become ourselves, before knowing who we are.

Let me give you one example:

A couple of weeks ago I was giving a workshop in persuasive presentations at a new Master in Corporate Communication at the Copenhagen Business School. I was explaining how the most efficient persuasion tool we have is showing who we are by showing our feelings - as one of the participants protested, 'Those kind of personal presentations are possible for the managers and bosses, in my position it wouldn't be well received'. And in a funny way he was right - as long as you don't take that step, filling out whatever role you are taking with what *you are feeling*, with *who you are*, you will never step out of the line of under-position. The decision-makers and leaders know this - they know who they are and they don't step back from revealing it while at work - that's how they entered their positions. By being themselves.

**Take the time to find out who you are. Make sure you become yourself. It's the best investment you'll ever make - no matter what you wind up doing.**

## The second story is about taking risks

I was working my way as a freelance trainer in Copenhagen. Finally, at 34, I was creating my own career, things were going well. But something was missing. I couldn't set my finger on it, but I had lost the spark. So I decided to live an old dream – to visit the house of the artist Frida Kahlo in Mexico City – and to learn Spanish.

I couldn't imagine crossing the ocean just to see a museum. Obviously I had to do something while I was there.

I chose a two-month stay with an organization for volunteers, and landed in a suburban recovery house for young drug addicts in the world's biggest city, with the goal to create a physical and vocal performance with the inhabitants. I didn't understand more than a few sentences of Spanish when I arrived. And I had no idea what struggling for existence means when you come from real poverty. My participants had so low self-esteem they couldn't even stand up straight. They sang out of tune, mostly missed the classes and when I talked about creating a show, they didn't understand why I made it into such a big deal.

But I knew why. I wanted them to connect with their beauty and dreams, I wanted to show them that they had dignity inside, no matter how low they had fallen. The training went slow, I had resistance everywhere. We practiced walking, standing and moving. We sang the songs out of tune so many times I almost forgot the melodies. Without understanding the Spanish translation, I read the Danish fairy tale by H.C. Andersen about the ugly duckling who in reality is a misplaced swan and asked them to write a poem about their longing to be that swan. Paper sheets were handed over wet with tears. From the sentences I composed a choir of their words using rhythms and dynamics, the main refrain being 'transformación' - because we CAN transform.

Always.

I will never forget the night of the final performance. Every chair was taken in the worn-down house by the former inhabitants who had left the organization to start a new life.

The performers, these people, having lost their youth and their hopes, joined together in one moving body, created by their longings, their voices and their dreams. Out of all the performances I have seen, this was the most dignified.

But there was more to it than that. In Mexico I met the soul-mate who changed my life. I learnt about racism and corruption, about grace and gratitude. From being European, I turned into becoming global. Now I know how privileged I am, how privileged we are.

When people heard about my volunteer project, they told me that the project was impossible. And many people told me that I was risking the security I had built up in Copenhagen by leaving. But I'd say: security as such is an illusion.

I'll give you an example:

When I returned to Copenhagen, I came back as a substitute at a school for refugees. One of my colleagues, Inger, had just gotten her permanent job position, and when we chatted on our way to work, she would go on about how she did this and that to secure her position, and she couldn't understand why I didn't do the same. It was as if she was trying to keep the threats of life itself at a distance. A few years later, due to the immigration restrictions in Denmark, the very same school was closed down. Inger's quest for security had fallen short, while I had started a new career path here in Barcelona.

**Don't go for security when you make your choices. The only security you'll ever find is the one that lies within your own path, following your dreams. Take the risk.**

## My third story is about making a difference.

Around the corner from here is the University Pompeu Fabra. I was giving a workshop entitled 'The Voice as a Tool and Resource' at their new postgraduate course in Women Leadership. We spent three evenings working with vocal techniques, with body connection and presence. It took me some time to create the necessary focus and attention in the group without chatting and commenting, but once we had gotten there, the process turned out to be quite a breakthrough for many of the participants.

As often is the case when working with the voice, our sense of authority and confidence is strengthened.

One of my participants was a medical doctor, let's call her Laura. She sent me her testimonial a couple of days after the workshop and with her permission and I would like to share it with you:

*"I don't know when I started having a bad relationship with my voice. I never noticed along the way. It deceived me in situations when I needed it, and so I lost trust in my voice and preferred to keep quiet.*

*Yet, by the end of your first session, my voice was floating potent, beautiful, vibrating, truly mine.*

*Now I realize – our voice is a reflection of our most authentic self. And I am progressing: During two important meetings last week, my presence was improved and I could make myself heard naturally. The effect of before and after the training is immense."*

The reward for this work is priceless. Knowing that Laura will go on liberating her potential is the greatest gift any trainer can ask for.

I got my job at the University of Pompeu Fabra as the result of networking. To get where I am today as an independent trainer, I have attended numerous business lunches, round tables, events and dinners.

What is striking in this scene is that the focus of it all is how much money you are making. The hero of the crowd will be the one who has most employees – independently of how he or she treats them, the one who expands and conquers - measured in dollars or euros.

I will be the last one to say that I don't care about money. I negotiate my own salary daily, and yes, I want to earn well and live a good life, and I am happy doing so.

But the real question isn't – how much money am I making?

The real question is – what do I leave behind?

What good does my work do?

At the end of the day, whatever you earn, you will spend or think about spending. But whatever you leave behind lives on and grows infinitely, beyond our imaginations.

When choosing your career, you are not making a living – you are making your life.

I feel lucky to be where I am. My job is to give people the opportunity to go places they haven't been before, connecting with themselves, with who they are and who they want to be.

My road to get here has often been confusing and I have felt off track, or rather, during long periods I haven't been able to see any track at all. Yet – in the end I am using all those weird things I did along the way as part of my toolbox when I design my training sessions for groups and individuals.

When I was asked to give you career advice to use on your way, these were the stories that first came into my mind. And looking back I can see that the values they represent are truly essential to me.

In Berlin I learnt about becoming myself, leaving for Mexico I learnt about taking risks and during my vocal and other workshops I continually learn about making a difference.

So – my words of advice to you, students at the University of Dreams, are:

**Make sure you become yourself, so that you can take the necessary risks, to make the difference only you can achieve.**