
The joy of a personal blog, or becoming a ‘blog mama’

By WENDEE HOLT CAMP

And so it was, I found myself in May 2005 a Ph.D. candidate at a prestigious university with a new full-time research job, a super-cute surfer-mountain-climber boyfriend and a 10-year freelance writing career under my belt.

Then the boyfriend cheated. I became the whistle-blower at my job and was unceremoniously forced to resign. I took a leave of absence from my doctoral studies. I sat crying in the Starbucks parking lot and took stock of what remained: my two glorious children and my drive, talent and desire to take my already successful writing career to the next level, self-sustenance. I decided I’d take it to the blogosphere.

When times get tough, writers write. Life’s most gut-wrenching experiences create our best material, beef jerky for our brain. I’m a heart-on-my-sleeve kind of gal anyway, so a personal blog seemed a great way to engage in belly-button gazing in a public forum. I didn’t do it for money or prestige, but as an outlet for my inner angst and a way to give my friends, family, colleagues, and even editors, insight into this writer’s life.

I first caught the blog bug from a shark biologist friend, who blogged through grief after her husband’s untimely death from gastric cancer at age 37. During breaks at the conservation workshop where we’d met, she’d receive emails from people around the world sympathizing and relating their stories. Blogging seemed a gratifying way to release emotions and connect with like-minded folks.

My own blog started months later as a sort of post-divorce metamorphosis journal, a way to write transparently, with a little bit of snark (“sarcastic, wisecracking, or cynical”). It was not, by any means, an intentional marketing strategy.

I dubbed my blog Bohemian Adventures, since I grew up in an intellectual hippie household, with a father who built the log cabin himself, with wood stoves for cooking and heating, kerosene lanterns, an outhouse and a huge veggie garden. And now that I think of it, what were those herbs always hanging from the rafters?

I fully embraced the anti-establishmentarianism of my childhood. Question authority! Question everything! Several definitions of Bohemian grace my blog’s façade, including:

\Bo*he”mi*an\:

- a nonconformist writer or artist who lives an unconventional life.

- Bohemia is a district ... bordered on the north by cold, on the west by hunger, on the south by love, and on the east by hope.

- Bohemians express themselves without regard for social convention. They attempt to experience the mysteries of life through their unique perspective.

My nearly-year-old blog has since followed me through many compromising positions: My colonoscopy. My two-week stint writing a book proposal in an off-the-grid New Mexico cabin where I contemplated the nature of frozen pee in the out-

house, dangled my feet off a cliff, and gagged on maggot-infested chocolate. My writing travels and adventures – kayak fly-fishing on Texas’ San Saba River, and prowling for gators in the coastal marshes. Sharing dark memories from the date rape I endured at age fifteen and the subsequent self-loathing and suicide attempt. Lamenting divorce after a 10-year marriage, transparently addressing my own failures, and continually striving for self-improvement. Getting snarky over intelligent design creationists’ stupidity and pondering how to balance my evolutionary biology education with my Christian faith – the focus of my book proposal.

It’s not your average ordinary blog, but it’s my ordinary life, laid bare for all to see.

Even the most personal blog has professional benefits. It can showcase your off-the-cuff writing style and reveal the breadth and depth of your personality – if you’re brave (or stupid) enough to go there.

I can’t pin my blog to any particular assignment, but editors and colleagues definitely read it and comment. In the past months, I’ve been called quirky, creative, and a free spirit – not to mention hyperactive (no less than three times). I personally prefer when SEJ veteran writer Roger Witherspoon told me, “as a freelancer you’re amazing!” Sometimes I do worry if I’m embarrassing myself by my transparency, but then again, my friend and SEJ colleague Ken Olsen reminded me of Natalie Goldberg’s wisdom: what is most personal is most universal.

One of the most gratifying aspects of having a blog, besides the positive feedback from web wanderers and colleagues, is becoming a blog mama. Several friends and fellow writers said my blog inspired them to follow suit, including SEJ member Miranda Spencer who started the Green Goddess Gazette (<http://green-gazette.blogspot.com/>). After we roomed together at the SEJ conference last fall, Spencer saw my blog and thought, “if she can do it why can’t I?”

Besides being fun to write and easy to set up, blogs have other benefits. “The joy is total self expression, to know I’m writing about something important and meaningful that will be published because I’m going to publish it,” says Spencer. “I get the same feeling from this as I did when I learned how to report and edit a TV segment at my local university station: it’s not brain surgery, just do it! It’s very empowering.”

Spencer initiated her blog more as a marketing tool than I did, a sort of mini-webzine, a hybrid personal-journalism blog on the things she finds most appealing: women’s issues, media and environment, with a little bit of snark. She attended the SEJ conference seminar by Contentious blog-owner (<http://www.contentious.com>) Amy Gahrn and realized blogging was both easy and vital, career-wise. Blogging keeps an otherwise stagnant website current, lively, and dynamic. It keeps people coming back. Blogs allow you to share one’s unique interests, expertise, and perspective with the world.

“When you get a response or see that people all over the world are reading it, you have contributed to the world conversation on important matters,” Spencer explains. Lately, her blog has started generating attention. “People from significant organizations are contacting ME and telling me about themselves as something I might want to write about or link to. It has also helped me become a faster, better writer.”

Some practical advice for the would-be blogger.

I use Google’s blogger.com. It’s mind-numbingly easy to set up, offers a variety of templates, you can upload photos, and in thirty minutes or less you can be blogging away.

When you visit blogger.com, you first set up an account, choose a blog name, and then select your template. The default URL for your new blog will be <http://your-blogsname.blogspot.com>. So my Bohemian Adventures blog is at <http://bohemianadventures.blogspot.com>. You don’t necessarily have to title your blog the exact name as the domain name, but it helps people remember it. Underneath the title itself, you describe the blog. Think like an editor: come up with a snazzy, catchy tagline.

Once you sign up, you’ll face an array of templates that turn your blog into a personal statement: different colored backgrounds, fonts, and layouts. You can always change the template, but once you get several posts, changing the template can mess up the general look and I don’t recommend doing it. By all means, change the template upfront to see which you prefer though.

As soon as you set up your blog, blogger will take you to the “Create Post” section. Before you type a post, I recommend selecting the “Settings” tab on top. This lets you give your blog a description (tagline), and change various default settings about how the blog looks. There’s not a whole lot the beginning blogger needs to change. If you select the Template tab, you’ll see the actual HTML – which can be dizzying if you’re not a computer programmer. I had a head start because I ran a web design company for a few years when the internet began and you had to know HTML.

The only thing you may need to modify in the template is the blog’s sidebar. The side bar shows the profile you set up in blogger.com, and you can link to other blogs or websites, or you can get fancy and add blog gadgets, like maps and counters. A hint: To find where to modify web links in the dizzying mess of code, select Ctrl-F (or Edit/Find) then type Edit-Me in the box. This will take you to the links, where you will see Google as a web link included in every new blogger.com blog, plus two links that say “Edit-Me.”

One critical factor if you use blogger.com: back up your writing somewhere else because if their server ever crashes, you could lose the whole shebang. I keep a copy of my blog entries in a Word document. Though you can compose on the fly in blogger.com, you might benefit by writing first in a separate document, then copying/pasting over to your blog so you always have a back up.

If you’re going to start a blog, stick to it. There’s nothing more frustrating than a blog that dies mid-stream. If you’re like most writers, jettisoning words from the mind onto paper (or in this case, virtual paper) is almost a necessity to maintain one’s sanity, so that part shouldn’t be difficult. I find time for it the way I would a personal journal. It’s a gift to myself, a way to unwind and catalog my life for future reference along with quirky photos and even, occasionally, advice to the world.

You can set up Google AdSense, where you place conspicuous, or tiny, ads on your blog. While some have made a fortune

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from blog revenue, don’t count on it. You don’t get into personal blogging – or news blogging for that matter – for fame and fortune. If it happens, you’re perhaps a more savvy blog provocateur than I. I was pleasantly surprised to find revenue on my latest bank statement from Google AdSense: \$0.30.

Blogs get more visitors with frequent – or at least regular – but short entries rather than long entries few and far between. I tend not to heed this advice. I post regularly but at sporadic intervals, and they tend to be a bit on the long side. Remember that I like to break rules? Question everything? The great thing about a blog is it’s all yours – your ticket to publish whatever you want for all the world to see. And just maybe, you’ll find like-minded folk who think you’re snarky and hip, they’ll click on your Google ads, and you’ll make a (very) small fortune.

Wendee Holtcamp is a Houston-based freelance writer who has written for Audubon, Sierra, Discovery Channel Online, NPR’s All Things Considered and others. She teaches an online writing course and is working on a book: “The Fish Wars: How Evolution and Christianity Can Make Peace.” Visit her website: www.wendeeholtcamp.com.

Helpful links:

- ClustrMaps offers a very cool (free) map you can put on your blog that shows globally where people visit your site from; <http://clustrmaps.com>.
- Google’s Blogger Help Forum: <http://groups.google.com/group/blogger-help>
- LiveJournal is another place you can set up a blog, but you’re on your own. I couldn’t figure it out. Then again, I’m impatient and didn’t try very hard: www.livejournal.com.
- Gather is a new site where you can set up free blogs: www.gather.com.