

Soul Food

Taking life head on

Creativity doesn't start and end with big ideas,
the secret is to put the right ones into action

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Who are you? I don't mean what's your name, or where are you from, or what do you do. I mean who are you, the spirit in this body, the life that is bursting to be lived? Not sure? Never mind, nor are the rest of us, but we're all having a lot of fun discovering the answer and getting closer to our own little truths all the time.

Looking for the real you is like walking towards the horizon, you can see it and it feels familiar and comfortable, but somehow it always seems to be out of reach. How frustrating, maybe it's better to just let go and settle into the known existence, enjoy the fun side of life to the full, do our best to get by and see what we make of it all at the end. Or perhaps not. How many lives do we have anyway?

For the sake of argument let's assume we have one life to lead, at least one to live at a time anyway. You're in the thick of yours right now, and whatever you're making of it one thing is for sure, it's yours and you're the only one who can make something magical out of it.

Who am I to tell you any of this? Nobody. No one. Someone. Someone just like you, and maybe one day you will want to pass on your experiences and knowledge to those around you, hoping that others will pass their secrets onto you in return. We can all learn it the hard way, but some of us can make useful short cuts by paying attention to the ups and downs that our contemporaries have enjoyed and suffered.

My story began in the same way that it continues, with a simple questioning of what's going on around me, what I feel I need to do to express my life this time around, and how the two could possibly fit together. I am a creative person (this is official now, although I have not been formally anointed by anyone) and therefore I am allowed to think outside of the box, attempt things other people would not wish to, and possibly be taken seriously when raising lovely new ideas.

As such, the concept of Soul Food is something I feel very close to. When asked to speak about Soul Food to the Nottingham Creative network my first thoughts turned to Creole chicken or Jamaican hot pot, but then the penny dropped. It needs breaking down.

Soul Food is the stuff that feeds our souls. The stuff that we instinctively know is right for us, is getting us along the rocky karmic road to our true destiny, is helping us to do our thing. But what on earth are our souls? We know we have a mind, and a body, but what is this hippy-buddhist nonsense about souls? Think of it this way, think about the spirit that is you, the essence of you that is entirely distinct to you. This soul is simply the essence of you, no big deal. You know you are so much more than a body with a mind controlling its functions, so go with it, feel your essence, familiarise yourself with it and bring it to the front of your stage.

So how do we feed the essence of ourselves, and why do we need to? Can't it just exist and develop naturally, all on its own? Yes it can, but unfortunately there is a lot going on that inadvertently gets in the way. Remember when you were a kid, the freedom you had to live in your imaginary worlds, the pretend games that were more real than a lot of the reality around you today? What happened to that person? You know as well as everyone else that that person is alive and kicking, still in there somewhere pitching ideas at you, suggesting alternatives, trying to influence you like in the old days. But these days things are a little different. You are mature adult now, and you know what is right and wrong, what to do and what not to do. You've learnt the ropes of our culture and you know exactly where you fit in.

Let's stop the train and take a look at the scenery. The landscape we're exploring is you and everything that you are. What is it that makes you tick, are you motivated by desires that drive you to create new things, work with images or sound, experiment with the status quo? How do you fit into the culture that has spawned you, are you valid, are you an outsider, are you too green, are you in touch, are you contributing or taking out?

These questions aren't ever answered, they go away for a while only to reappear and challenge you again, just when you thought you had it all worked out. This is when you have to gather up all of your courage and make bold leaps of faith into the unknown, with little idea of the outcome other than a knowledge that you're quite good at steering your own ship in any kind of water.

As I appear to be the case study in this piece, I'll share my journey by way of illustration. I believed that the only route for me to follow was to begin by enjoying myself, keeping an eye on making sure I was always growing in some shape or form, and then see how it worked out. My mother always told me to 'be good' which I was happy to interpret as 'be good at what you do' rather than behave

myself, and so far I've managed to get away with it. (She also told me 'not to let anyone cramp my style', which is a lot easier said than done).

The first direction I took myself off in was to develop my interest in ancient history by studying archaeology. What fun it was too. Always off on digs, working in the Near East for months at a time, living communally with other volunteers, digging up ancient cultures and figuring out that we're not so different these days to our ancestors 6,000 years ago.

Leap of Faith 1: I'll become a publisher

Just as this fledgling career was beginning to sprout feathers I jumped ship. Archaeologists are great people – some of the very best - but it's a harsh life packed with politics, academics and very low incomes. Only the select few can hope to survive and prosper, and I felt my destiny lay elsewhere. In the form of an exciting new travel magazine in fact.

So I sold a business plan to a publisher up north, who took me on and gave me funds to launch the UK's first Independent Traveller's Magazine, called Wanderlust. What fun. Three years of learning the crafts of typesetting, graphic design, editorial, publishing, printing, distribution and advertising sales. What an experience, and what a shame it never quite got off the ground. Never mind, it needed a lot more resource, and the pilot issue was truly the dog's doodahs.

Leap of Faith 2: I'm going to be a writer

Still, I had discovered something fundamental to the essence that happens to be me: I enjoy writing, and people seem to rate my efforts. OK, this feels good, let's do more of this. How about I set myself the challenge of earning my living as a commercial writer. Anything will do: PR, copywriting, journalism, whatever.

After about five or ten good and bad interviews I strike lucky, and a quality agency in Nottingham offers me the mind-blowingly incredible job of trainee copywriter! Maybe I will get the life I'm after. I learn the craft from true professionals and - guess what - I can do it, just about. After three or four years I was a master of creative recruitment advertising and marketing (it felt good to me at the time).

Leap of Faith 3: I've got to work for myself

If you're true to your heart you have to face facts. Crap bosses and managers who can't see potential can only be tolerated for so long. There comes a time when enough is enough, and this is the time to let your soul take the wheel once again.

Freelancing in the evenings for a year gave me enough clients to chuck the day job and enter the world of permanent fear and anxiety. You don't half feel the blood in your veins when the work dries up and the bills keep dropping through the letterbox. Suddenly strength of mind becomes far more important than creative ideas or big plans to be successful.

A few years in and the law of 'what goes around comes around' was beginning to ring true. A few big clients, a handful of regular briefs and a reputation good enough to keep the phone ringing out of the blue every now and again saw me right. In fact, just as it got good it got too good and all I ever seemed to do was write, write, write and write. So what that the bank account was filling up, a wage from the cashpoint didn't buy me my weekend back and I was becoming rather one-dimensional.

Leap of Faith 4: I need colleagues and support

Somehow the lure of discussing Eastenders the next day became more appealing than the solitude of freelancing from home. I chopped my salary by two thirds, took on offices, recruited a trainee writer and a young designer and we were in business. So much better for the soul, so much more fun and so much more healthy. A lot less money, and a far better solution.

Running a small, self-sufficient creative studio was a dream. Everything could be seen and managed, and we could all look after each other during the times of high and low pressure. Four or five years later and we knew we had to make a change.

Leap of Faith 5: We're going to go for it

Clients knew how good we were but still wanted more. Organic growth is safe and secure but it's slow and labourious, so it was time to take some chances. We built our numbers from 5 to 28 within a couple of years, strengthening every weak spot and taking big chances with young talent and proven wisdom.

Bingo. The clients followed and we became a player, able to see ahead further than ever before, plan with our clients, develop our people and improve continually. All of our souls were being fed at once and we had a few sweet years that those of us who were involved in often look back on and will never forget.

Leap of Faith 6: We're going to really go for it this time

You have to make changes because if you don't change will happen to you. Keep an eye on the market, the new developments, the competition and most importantly your instincts. Let your heart dominate your decision making, so long as your head still has the power of veto.

A client raised the possibility of about 30 staff joining our team of 28. Despite the considered advice of many experts and the strong direction of my head, I followed my instincts and went for it. We took on a stunning and massive Manor House in the heart of our village and moved our team and the ex-client team into our new headquarters all at once. They were up and running by 10.00am the first day!

Leap of Faith 7: My baby is an adult now

A few years later and it's clear that the organisation is self-sufficient. It exists on its own basis, feeds itself, takes care of itself and has its own strong personality. It is the combination of so many creative spirits that it no longer relies on being pumped up by the spirit of its creator.

Stepping aside, I replaced myself with a formidable, successful and highly creative managing director. My role became non-executive and I returned to my humble origins, working in a room above the local hardware shop. Instead of managing 80 employees and directing the fastest growing design agency in the UK I was back to basics, lecturing on copy to design students, running corporate seminars, being a brand consultant and writing a textbook.

What's coming next? I'd like to ask you the same thing. What will your next leap of faith be? If you've not made one in the last three or four years you're due one any moment, so get ready for action.

A small but strange observation is that by remaining in control of my destiny thus far and steering my own ship I have grown one of the most successful (so far) design agencies in the heart of the village where I grew up. Very good for the soul, but not necessarily a fundamental requirement of soul food. My next leap of faith will be into a zone that may enable me to write short stories, novels, poems, something like that. Or maybe I'll do more training? Then again I've always fancied having a go at sculpture. Don't ask me, they're only silly ideas.