

# CHRONIC PROFIT

Building Your Small Business  
While Managing Persistent Pain



ALISON TEDFORD

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## **PREFACE: HOW AND WHY I'M HERE**

“We can’t let people keep dying out of politeness.”

I wrote those words on May 7, 2020, on my Facebook page in frustration and devastation at another Black life lost. We were in the initial social isolation period everyone called quarantine and amidst the eerie quiet, Black people were still being killed by police and I had something to say about it.

I wasn’t always loud like this in my business. I started my marketing practice without a specific point of view. It didn’t have strong positioning in any respect other than that I created quality content, but over the course of quarantine I came into my own. I said what I felt needed to be said and it turned into both social change and client attraction.

Businesses were closing. People were crying and baking bread. I was a newly single mom, an entrepreneur with a struggling business that refused to give up. Corona took half my business the first week it hit, and I was devastated. I was worried I was going to become homeless. My long-term partner had just left and my business was imploding and I didn’t know what the heck to do.



Going into that phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, I knew my life was never going to be the same because my family had dissolved, and it changed me. I was never going to be the same person that I was. And then all of a sudden, a virus ravaged Earth, and everybody was tossed into the same new lack of routine, lack of certainty, lack of anything that was familiar that I had become somewhat accustomed to over the course of a number of weeks.

So, I started sharing my deepest thoughts on Facebook under the hashtag #nofakebooking, and “we share the messages we need the most.” I was something of a pandemic Pollyanna (I even bought the domain pandemicpollyanna.com) and I just started writing. I started pouring my heart out to the people who were in my world about the things that mattered to me. I wrote about Black lives. I wrote about Trans lives. I wrote about all of the things that were in my heart.

I started a community gratitude practice with daily check-ins where people would share about their days and how they were making it through.

My community and I bonded over the shared experience of a pandemic and how it affected our personal lives, our romantic lives, our business lives.

After all, it touched everything. But a funny thing happened. When it touched my life, everything grew. The chaos of this deadly virus and these horrible circumstances stabilized my business and made it grow. I was the calm, consistent, reassuring, hopeful but authentic voice my community needed to normalize what they were feeling. People got to know me — the real me.

I wrote a love letter to my community.

# My Quarantine Life Project

I'm not planning to learn Spanish.

I won't be making sourdough.

I'm a copywriter. Every day I write things to convince people to buy the course, book the meeting, schedule the keynote, ditch the diets, make all sorts of changes.

I only sell things I believe in because I believe I'm good at what I do, and I only want to use it for good.

Words of Persuasion are my superpower.

My Quarantine Life project is to sell something a little different to you.

I'm determined to convince you to keep going (even though it's hard).

I want you to believe you're not alone (even if you're isolated).

I would love to see you exercise self-compassion and leave space for the big feelings (even when it's scary).

I would be so happy for you to feel validated and understand that whatever you're feeling right now is OK (even when it feels like a lot).

I want you to understand it's reasonable to not be OK, but I don't want it to overwhelm you completely (even when life gets really heavy).

I want to assure you that subscribing to diet culture will only make the space you have for joy smaller (even when people try to scare you about The Quarantine 15).

My goal is to keep showing up for you until you believe those things and until you buy into you, because I believe in you.

What is your quarantine life project?

I have immense survivor guilt about this: I know how many businesses didn't have the experience of thriving during a pandemic. But that was my experience. That was my truth. I lost almost everything in my business, and I stabilized it and I doubled my monthly pre-COVID revenue after so many years of going through the motions, keeping the lights on, and hoping something big would happen. A few months later it would triple.

I wanted my business to grow, but I didn't wish for the painful circumstances in which it ended up thriving.

After so many years of being behind the scenes, I became visible. I appeared on CBC Radio five times one day. I spoke on a panel about how to raise antiracist kids to hundreds of people. I was on global public radio about race-based data and Indigenous people and how they've been left behind by the healthcare system. I was on podcasts. I spoke anywhere people would listen and probably places people didn't.

I got really loud and people started paying attention. I also started listening really hard. I heard my fellow business owners complaining about how they didn't know how to talk to their communities about what was happening around them.

I watched icons get "cancelled" because of their ineffective responses to the Black Lives Matter movement. I saw people struggling with how to sell with sensitivity in a difficult time. People were confused, lost, and scared.

My natural instinct as a mom and nurturer was to comfort, to educate, and to reassure.

These questions that people had were all questions that I felt prepared to answer because of my extensive experience with intercultural communication in government, and my experience managing communities online, doing antiracism education to foster understanding and reduce systemic barriers. My experience as an Indigenous woman who has done all of these things had me perfectly positioned to be able to serve people who desperately needed serving.

When I tried to do antiracism education work informally while maintaining marketing practice, I found I was exhausted. Keeping

those two pieces separate and maintaining them with the same level of fervor was depleting my already low energy.

After all, I was working really hard through the pandemic trying to keep the lights on and at the same time carrying an immense emotional weight trying to explain the experience of racism and I couldn't hold those two things separately. I needed to be able to bring them together in order to function. And that's how Stay Woke Not Broke, my first group program, was born.

## **My Story: In the Beginning**

This is probably the most unexpected escape from prison story you will ever read, but here goes.

Entrepreneurship does not run in my family and as it turns out, I ran from the very thing my family always did, which was work in the prisons. I did a sixth grade project on substance abuse programming in the prison system and didn't think much of it. It was where my dad, my stepmom, my uncle, and my aunt worked. Later, my cousin, my stepbrother, and I would join also. It was what we did.

Looking back, I don't think I knew anybody who ran a business when I was growing up. This was so far outside of my plan it's almost laughable that I ended up here. Growing up I thought maybe I would become a lawyer or a psychologist, but things didn't turn out that way.

I thought my path was pretty much preordained when I got my first government job. I figured I had a career for life and the idea that I would be working from home designing national campaigns, working with brands and business owners all over the world, all from the comfort of my own living room never entered my mind.

I didn't have a degree in anything. I had a year of assorted college courses that together didn't amount to very much. I didn't feel like I had any of the ingredients to build a successful business. I didn't have a big idea. I just had a longing inside me to make something happen and I didn't even know what it was.

I wanted to change the world, but I didn't know where to start or if business could have anything to do with that. I didn't even have a business plan or a website or Facebook page. This never should have worked but it did.

## **A Good Dream, but Not My Dream (Leaving Government)**

I started working in government when I was 18. I started in the Federal Treaty Negotiation Office doing clerical work and moved into working in the department that handled residential school claims where I would stay for a few years. Later I transferred to work in the prison system while I worked my way up from being a secretary to be a project officer specializing in Performance Measurement, Policy, Planning, Access to Information, and Privacy.

I had what so many people wanted, and I wasn't satisfied. I didn't feel like I had a lot of room for upward mobility when I got where I was at 32 and it was an uncomfortable feeling to feel like there wasn't much more than that for me to achieve. I felt stuck, like I peaked too early, and then what was I supposed to do?

I struggled with the antiquated Human Resources policies and internal hiring practices that made me jump through the same hoops over and over again to prove my disability and wait to see if my required accommodation would be honored.

Everybody connected to the process had the very best of intentions but there just wasn't a structure in place that made advancement as unencumbered as it is for people who don't have a disability. It felt so hard to get ahead and I was demoralized.

I struggled with long-term temporary opportunities that didn't translate to job security. Those situations meant that when the payroll system went haywire a large proportion of income could be at risk of not arriving. That wasn't a risk I was prepared to accept.

As the primary breadwinner in my home I needed to know that my money would arrive as scheduled in full. If I wasn't going to have that stability, I wanted the instability to be on my own terms.

Beyond the financial concerns, I found myself trying to solve the same problems over and over again and while there was progress it was discouraging and frustrating and a large ship to turn. I longed to work in a nimble organization that could easily implement strategic direction and change course with more ease than a government entity.

It's not that there was no desire for change, I worked with brilliant, kind, compassionate, amazing humans who wanted the very

best. Nobody was nefariously opposing progress. But systems are hard to change. We were all people with the best of intentions trying to do the very best thing that we could within the constraints of what was possible. It just wasn't enough for me at the time.

When I joined the government, I was an idealist and I thought that I could change things from the inside and to be fair, I believe that a lot of the things that I did created meaningful change. I watched others do the same.

I just longed for something more. I didn't know what it was but there was something that didn't fit right. It was like wearing shoes that blistered my feet but looked really pretty. They looked nice, but it was so uncomfortable and painful inside.

I can't tell you how many hours I rehashed my discontent with friends who had varying levels of sympathy for my plight as I tried to figure out what life could look like. I wondered where I would have the satisfaction of achieving new things, of seeing meaningful change, and going to bed completely satisfied with my contribution to the world.

I actually wondered if that even existed. I wondered if I was just spoiled and selfish for not being happy with what so many people would love to have. So many people would tell me that, you know, "that's why it's called work" and for a lot of years I bought into that and I kept grinding, trying to find a way to be happy with something that wasn't appropriate for me.

I finally came to the realization that the work that I was doing could be a good dream, it could just be someone else's dream and that it didn't have to be bad for it not to be right. It could be a good thing for someone else and there could be something better for me.

It was the first time that I accepted that me not wanting to do something was reason enough not to do it. After so many years of being socialized to be accommodating and to do what I could if I could no matter whether I was interested in doing so or not, I felt it was time to honor my truth.

I tried to find small ways to explore what that could look like, a new life on the outside.

## Falling in Love (with Blogging)

The first way I explored this possible new life was through blogging. Somebody at my gym suggested that I start blogging because my Facebook statuses were so funny. I didn't really think that it was going to work. I didn't think anyone would be interested in reading my posts. I figured maybe 12 people would read them and the blog would fade into obscurity, hopefully with very little embarrassment. But I decided to try, because what did I have to lose?

I started blogging about my feelings around equality, fitness, parenting, and mental health. I used it as my platform to talk about the things that were in my heart and the things that I was really passionate about like my local gym and the people that I met there and all of the fun adventures that I was going on as a single parent.

I made a lot of connections blogging and made great friendships. I was approached by brands fairly shortly after I started blogging and was asked to do sponsored content for them. This led to me being in an online commercial for my gym, doing a campaign for mental health awareness for a national drugstore chain, embarking on a partnership with a trampoline company, and even getting to look on as my son experienced the joy of becoming a Vancouver Canuck for a day.

I watched as he skated in Rogers Arena, accepted his jersey, signed a "contract" with the organization, and later he experienced a game from incredible seats. The most memorable moment of that experience was when Darcy Rota came up to him and greeted him by name. His eyes grew wide and he asked this famous hockey player "How did you know my name?" Darcy smiled at him and said, "It's taped to the front of your helmet."

I learned I had a voice and I learned some people actually cared what I had to say. I had social media channels that started to grow, and I started to learn through trial and error what worked, how to grow the channels, how to curate content that would interest people, and how to engage with and relationship-build with my audience.

I also learned about something called guest blogging. I learned that if you write for larger websites, people who read them will want to come over and read your blog and follow you on social media. My following grew and grew.

I started pitching publications with stories I could write for them. This expanded my network outside of Canada and into the US and ultimately worldwide as my content was accepted on collaborative blogs and in magazines. I got to make friends with and write with writers from all over the world. I traveled to Baltimore and met them.

Ultimately, my words would be accepted at the Good Men Project, Upworthy, Al-Jazeera, CBC, *Today's Parent*, *Asparagus Magazine*, *To Write Love On Her Arms*, *Scary Mommy*, *Vancouver Mom*, *Urban Moms*, *The Huffington Post*, *West Coast Families*, *Savvy Mom*, and more. My words got around the world. They were used in university classes. They became memes made by people I've never met.

I received thoughtful comments from people about how I was able to explain the things that they felt alone in feeling, that they didn't know other people felt that way, that they were inspired to keep going in the recovery from eating disorders or they felt less alone as a single parent. I wrote those words by myself, but they built community. My community.

My channels and influence grew and my writing skill improved and I learned how to work with editors, how to create content according to a pitch, how to pitch things, how to deal with criticism, how to approach difficult topics with authenticity and vulnerability, and how to really connect with people.

The idea of a writer in the cabin in the woods is not the reality of the modern writer. As much as it's about beautiful words and meaningful thoughts it's also about the power of connection and relationship-building. These are the things that help content get perfected, published, and shared.

My world got so big through the written word. I never expected how confident I would become through my writing and how many doors this would open for me.

## **The First Taste That Got Me Hooked (Subcontracting)**

One door that would open for me was when the publisher of a blog that I wrote for, *Bluntmoms*, advertised that she had contract positions available in her marketing agency. I decided to throw my hat



in the ring because I had experience building social media channels of my own so I thought maybe I could be useful in helping her build channels for her clients. She took a chance on me and I started with one Facebook account.

Over time, I grew the number of accounts for which I was responsible. I became part of her organization as a virtual assistant; I went from that one channel to realizing that this is what I wanted to do. I mean, not building Facebook pages specifically, but being independent and having my own business.

She was a corporate escapee like I wanted to be. She blew up her life and built something that she was really proud of and I really admired the way she approached business and life, and still do.

When I shared this longing and this secret desire to start my own business, she was so gracious. She introduced me to people who needed my services. She filled my funnel with new leads so that I could work full-time in my business. Over the course of five months I went from cubicle dweller to couch-based marketing consultant.

The first week I worked full-time in my business I was overwhelmed with the love and support that I received. She and her second-in-command were gracious enough to shower me with gifts including flowers, chocolates, a box full of items to help me manage my chronic pain when working from home, and a lap desk. I was so touched. My journey had begun in earnest.

I started with a three-month leave of absence to see if full-time entrepreneurship would be a fit for me. There came a point where I could not imagine returning and so I tendered my resignation.

## **Why I Became an Entrepreneur**

Disillusioned by bureaucratic life I saw an opportunity to be creative and to be able to provide advice in a context where it could be immediately implemented, and I could see the results. I was able to see both the effects of long-term investment and instant gratification in working with people in my marketing practice.

I could pick and choose which projects I worked on, how much I would be paid for them, and I could make decisions as the head of my own entity that would position me for success, my definition of success.

I really craved creativity and the ability to innovate unencumbered by the trappings of bureaucracy. I wanted to build something all by myself and be proud of what I could accomplish. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it and I wanted to see how far I could take it.

## **Unexplained Pain and Cubicle Life**

The other reason that I pursued entrepreneurship was because of the pain that I was in. For years I experienced musculoskeletal pain with no rhyme or reason, seemingly. I was constantly nauseous. I struggled with panic attacks all day every day. I was hyper stimulated by an open office environment and needed quiet.

I didn't know why I was so sick, and I was nervous of pressing the issue with my care team. I expected that they would say that I was in discomfort because I was overweight, and I felt like there had to be more to it than that. I was afraid of being dismissed so I didn't push it until it became unbearable, long after I left.

I had been diagnosed with a number of conditions that were related to my ultimate diagnosis, which is Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, and I struggled with navigating the work world while dealing with these issues.

Self-employment gave me what I needed before I knew why I needed it. I needed a space where I could accommodate myself without having to ask for anyone's permission. I needed to be able to nap when I needed to nap. I needed to be able to start my day when I felt ready and rested and well. I needed to be able to contort myself into whatever position was most comfortable regardless of how silly it looked.

I needed to be able to dress however I wanted to dress for the sake of my comfort. I had to constrain the length of my workday according to what I could tolerate on any given day and to be able to have the discretion to make that decision for myself.

I wanted less structure so that I could build something that works for me. I needed to be in the driver's seat of my career and to be able to pick and choose projects based on what works for me.

Ultimately, what I learned was that with my diagnosis stress is something that significantly impacts the severity of symptoms and so being able to select projects based on stress management was a game-changer for me.

My life living with this condition is not easy and I had to find ways to make it more bearable. I wanted complete control over my environment. I needed to be able to take control of my life in order to be able to take control of my wellness.

## **Craving Balance As a Mom**

Another reason I decided to become an entrepreneur was so that I could be more involved as a mom. I wanted to be able to take days off to participate in field trips or things that were important to my son without having to worry if I could get the day off. It's not that time off was ever unreasonably denied, it's just that I didn't want to have to ask permission. I wanted flexibility to be a mom, to do what I do and to not have to worry about what people thought about that.

It turns out my son really enjoys me working from home and being an entrepreneur because he knows that when he needs me, I'm available and that I can be there for him. This proved particularly useful over the course of the pandemic when other parents were looking for childcare and trying to figure out how to navigate a world without school. We were already well-positioned because I was home and he could be home with me, and it was no problem.

I didn't have to worry about being limited by vacation time because I could work from wherever I am. I could bring my laptop and wake up early and work on things before we started out on touristy adventures. I could work anywhere with an internet connection or at least a cell phone signal. When my son's lacrosse tournaments started on a day that wasn't a weekend I could just work from the sidelines if necessary or from our hotel or in the car. I could have the freedom to make things work for me.

## **Longing for Flexibility**

It's kind of funny because one of the hallmarks of Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome is hypermobility. By definition my body has too much flexibility, but I felt like my lifestyle wasn't flexible enough. I really needed

the ability to work hard during some seasons, work less hard during other seasons, and to find balance in my own way.

I needed to be able to be creative about how I show up for people and how I serve my clients. I didn't want to be constrained by a job description. I wanted to write my own. I wanted to keep that under constant revision with each new experience assessing how things worked for me and whether projects were things I wanted to do more or less of.

I wanted to be able to grow what I wanted to grow at whatever speed I wanted to grow and just have room.

I longed for freedom. Like in that Dixie Chicks (now they go by "The Chicks") song, I needed "Wide Open Spaces." I needed "room to make her big mistakes" and boy did I make mistakes.

I'll tell you all about them in the following chapters.