

While in the grip of the classic domesticity-stifled syndrome, retired from teaching with two small sons, I felt keenly the need for some form of paid, precise work, both financially, and to preserve my somewhat tenuous grip on sanity and the world outside. There were precious, solitary hours when son (a) was at nursery school and son (b) asleep to be put to the purpose; and an English degree opens diverse career doors. I took up, as the months went by, proof reading, free-lance writing, editing, the marking of English examination papers; and the compilation of indexes to books. This last often occasions blinks in listeners; non-fiction books don't end at the last page of text, and the compilation of indexes is watched over with rigorous, professional eye by the Society of Indexers. To a compulsive list-maker, crossword-puzzle addict and tracer of single themes through literary works the task of index-compilation seemed mentally tailor-made. I have now [1978] compiled well over a hundred commissioned indexes, to books ranging from the memoirs of Konrad Adenauer to *Erotic Art of the East* (some concern there as to whether the Post Office would transmit the illustrations).

Free-lance work at home with two, then three, small children did bring its own problems. The worst moments were when employers telephoned whilst a baby was actually crying on my lap, or visiting children joining mine in an uproarious game which I could not inaudibly subdue: how consoling once to hear a child crying too at the other end of the phone!

My own offspring were early trained to high regard of the telephone. Not Fiddling with Mummy's Cards was their major taboo; especially after one child was found about to abstract all the pink ones from a set ready for typing. They had their own "indexes", old cards of mine in shoe-boxes, which they removed, pencilled and replaced as to the manner-born -- which indeed they were. A two-year-old made a great impression at the infant clinic, looking at a tray of record cards and lisping, 'Is that the lady's index?'

It took a stern will (not just sluttishness !) to ignore bed-making, washing-up, dirty (soaking) nappies and all and to sit down amid dust and debris to freelance work as soon as the sons had left for nursery school; but housework can be done while answering childish prattle -- marking or indexing cannot. Over-tight schedules, however, sometimes meant that work overflowed from the school hours' respite. Some tasks could be amalgamated with some domestic pursuits; simple advance- or proof-reading worked on while breast-feeding, or in the hours passed in doctors' or clinic waiting-rooms; typing during *Jackanory* or *The Avengers* (a husband's fancies too can come between a woman and her work!); and school hours reserved for the types of work that do demand -- plaintively -- absolute quiet and concentration.

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Another problem was time-keeping. Some employers pay free-lancers by the hour, which demands strict record keeping: noting on sitting down to work that it is 9.18 a.m.; after answering phone or doorbell, agonizing over the precise number of minutes spent away from the desk; eventually handing one's husband a crooked column, "Monday 5th 9.12-11.20 less 15 mins, +1 hr+20 mins, 2.10-3.30. Tues 9.25-10.50, +25 m + 1 hour less 10 m ..." with the instruction that it be added up, converted into hours and multiplied by x pounds y pence. One rationalizes that the office worker does not have a specific pay deduction for 15 minutes spent watching the traffic or discussing TV with a passing secretary -- but the free-lance conscience demands strictest accounts rendered. Truly one may say with Thomas Paine, These are the times that try men's souls. It is not only the business of computing the total of hours; this method of assessing payment assumes that one is always working against the clock, flat out, head down.

Sometimes, though, schedules permitting, one may choose to take things more gently -- lingering over reading, idly filing cards alphabetically while half-watching television: but one can hardly charge the full rate for relaxed spinning out of a job. I most conscientiously arrive at a total of 15 hours 40 minutes; subtract something for lingering over the initial reading; try to guess what proportion of the time was spent typing (paid at a lower rate, but under my own system, not worked at separately); and arrive at a figure which is so near guess-work as to represent the number I first thought of in assessing how long the job might take. I see why entertainers pay such high regard to the art of timing.

Working freelance at home does become easier as children get older. When they start school, you reap a golden harvest of undisturbed hours; when they start homework, they understand how a person may need to sit at a desk, head down, ignoring all around them.

Having precise, academic work to concentrate on has proved a splendid antidote to the hectic and sometimes mindless whirl of house-work and child-rearing. It divides my life between spates of frantic, head-down-when-ever-possible, totally committed time when invitations are refused and meetings unattended, dust gathers and children play alone; and periods when it suddenly seems like a holiday to assail the heaps of washing, indulge in orgies of baking, polishing and outings with the children. It does at all events prevent monotony setting in.

-- by *Hazel K. Bellin* *National Housewives Register*
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