# WRITER

## JEDIAH JENKINS

Interview by Tina Essmaker February 9, 2016 Photo by Gleeson Paulino

At the age of 30, Jedidiah Jenkins quit his day job and embarked on a 16-month, 10,000-mile bike trip from Oregon to Patagonia, Chile, the self-imposed catalyst for pursuing his dream of writing a book. After garnering a massive online following for writing about his travels, he has since returned home to LA, where he recently launched a magazine, Wilderness, and is currently working on a book about his cross-continental adventure.

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Tell me about your path to what you’re doing now. I grew up in Nashville, Tennessee, to parents who were both creative.

Back in the ‘70s, they traveled across America for five years and wrote about their experiences for National Geographic. Their journey captured the imagination of America because the country was having an identity crisis at the time—the Vietnam War was going on, the president had left office, and everything was a shitshow. I don’t want to call them eccentric, but it didn’t surprise me when they got divorced in the ‘80s. Being raised by two free spirits meant that the conventional track most humans findI studied creative writing and film at the University of Southern California. Unfortunately, after pursuing the creative arts, I felt like the right side of my brain had been so overly represented that I had no raw, marketable skills. At age 22, it’s intimidating to suddenly find yourself thinking, “I am never going to find a job and I can’t pay rent—what am I supposed to do?” Like many people, I contemplated law school and thought I might enjoy it, so I decided to go. I became very convicted knowing that I could decide to go, when many didn’t have that choice. I felt like I owed it to my privilege to try. Law school was formative in teaching me about how legal theory shapes civilization, and it really affected me. Eventually, while working at internships after graduation, I realized that I didn’t actually want to work at a big law firm. I had been raised by creative parents and so creatively developed up to that point that it felt constricting to work in a giant machine that existed solely to make money.

Around that time, in my mid–twenties, I went to go work for some friends of mine who had started a nonprofit called Invisible Children, which focuses on activism to end the use of child soldiers in Central East Africa. Invisible Children was where I discovered that I love putting complex ideas into words and that I actually wanted to become a writer. At the time, I was working as a lawyer, but I kept being pulled into storyboard meetings to help write for documentaries and campaigns. My coworkers liked how I phrased things, so I’d write up voiceovers for them. Over time, I was phased out of my lawyer position and worked solely as a writer for Invisible Children for a number of years.

It’s funny how the universe conspires to change your mind or set you on a certain course. When I was 27, I read Malcolm Gladwell’s book, Outliers. In it, he talked about the “10,000-Hour Rule,” which made sense to me, even if it’s not hard science: if people dedicate 10,000 hours to something, then they become an expert in it. That concept made me think about what I wanted to become an expert in. Youth movements? Millennial activism? Making documentaries? I considered a lot of things, but I kept coming back to my desire to write a book. Then I wondered, “How am I going to write a book? I’m too young to have anything worthwhile to say.” I remembered the quote from Benjamin Franklin: “Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing.” I thought to myself, “Well, what if I can do both?” What if I could do something objectively interesting and then write about it?

“So many people have dreams they want to pursue, but they’re afraid to talk about them because they don’t want to fail or have others hold them to it.” I decided that when I turned 30 I would take a year off to go on a bike trip from Oregon to Patagonia and then write a book about it. I realized that if didn’t do it, I would go deeper into the nonprofit world, wake up as a 65-year-old expert in international criminal law, and think, “Wow, I never chased that dream I wanted to chase.” Even if my book ended up being no good, at least I had tried. I could always go back to what I already knew how to do, but I wanted to do something while in my relative youth to get that nagging feeling—that great discontent—out of me.

I believe deeply in the power of speaking your dreams into existence. So many people have dreams they want to pursue, but they’re afraid to talk about them because they don’t want to fail or have others hold them to it. They ask, “Who am I to do that?” So I scared myself into going after my dream by telling everybody. I gave my three-year notice at my job, and they were like, “That’s not a thing.” (laughing) Once I did that, it led to me speaking it into existence: I talked openly about it on my blog and social media, and people started saying, “We can’t wait for your book. It’s going to be so cool!” Because of that, literary agents started approaching me about making the book happen. My community began to hold me to it, which forced me to do it even when I felt scared. As the start date approached, I thought, “Well, I can’t not do it now.”

Everything started to happen before it happened because I talked about wanting it to happen. I’m not trying to sound brave, but I was willing to scare myself by setting high expectations for what I wanted to do.

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