

Ep #91: Rewriting the Starving Artist Story with Forbes



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Tobi Fairley

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You are listening to the *Design You Podcast* with Tobi Fairley, episode number 91.

Welcome to the *Design You Podcast*, a show where interior designers and creatives learn to say no to busy and say yes to more health, wealth and joy. Here is your host, Tobi Fairley.

Hey, hey, friends. It is an exciting week here at Tobi Fairley Inc. We are so super-excited to have a feature with Forbes this week. Some of you may have already seen it, but it's really a dream come true, for sure. And you can find the link in the show notes and, of course, all over my social because it's definitely something we're talking about this week.

But I want to bring the topic, not the fact that I was in Forbes, but the fact that there was a really cool conversation I had with Forbes. And I want to bring that to the podcast today and really shine a light on it, because it's really important to me, okay?

So, what is the article about? Well, it's about how I've built two seven-figure businesses, my design business, and my consulting or coaching business, including Design You, it's part of that business, and how I really kicked the starving artist mentality to the curb along the way of developing and growing my businesses.

And, how I developed a mindset and a business that was profitable and scalable, unlike the traditional business model and mindset for most creatives, right? Because most of us really, whether we mean to or not, end up living that starving artist mentality for a long, long time, if not forever.

So, today I want to talk about this concept, and I really want to help those of you who are still stuck in starving artist mode, and struggling to monetize your talents and your creativity. I really want you to see that this is a thing, and you might want to shine a light on your own mindset and how you're keeping yourself stuck there.

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Okay, so here's what I know. Creative business owners are absolutely 100% as important to our lives as more traditionally revered occupations, like doctors and lawyers. Because our work as creatives enhances our quality of life every single day, okay?

And as I mentioned in the Forbes article, I recently had a conversation with one of my private clients who I was coaching on one of my strategy days that I do with people. And she said to me, that she really struggled to think her work and her job were that important.

And when we talked about why, she said she had a lot of doctors as clients, and those doctors are saving lives every day. And so when she compares herself to that, which we all know, comparison is a problem, right? They say it's the thief of joy. Very much true. But it's also the reason that we all perpetuate the starving artist mentality a lot of times.

Because she's looking at her job compared to saving lives, and she's feeling very inadequate in many, many ways. And so she said that that was really a reason that she struggled to think her work was important, and that it was worth very much money.

The money she needed to charge really didn't not only make ends meet, but definitely, it had her struggling to believe that her creative work was as important as the price she would like to charge, to build a life that she really loved.

So, here's what I want you to know as creatives. Whether you are an interior designer, or a web designer, or a stager, or a photographer, event planner, or an artist as a painter, or something like that, whatever kind of creative you are, hear me on this. Your work matters.

And yes, of course, in a crisis moment, like a cancer diagnosis or a car wreck, or a brain tumor, do we absolutely want the brightest and best physician in our corner, in our operating room? Absolutely. They do save lives. And we want other professionals like attorneys doing stuff when we're

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in a lawsuit, or we're setting up a business and we're trying to protect ourselves. It's really important.

But guess what? We save lives too, and we definitely enhance them every single day. We as creatives save people from burnout and depression. We add to their wellbeing, their wellness. We help people feel happy and connected and rested. And we help them create memories that matter. We help them be able to be their best self, in their business and in their lives.

And that, in many ways and on many days, is just as important, or more so, as those crisis moments. And hopefully most of us don't even have crisis moments more than once a year, or once every few years. But even if we do, right, what we do still matters.

So yeah, it's rare, we hope, that we have those situations where we need doctors and lawyers and other highly effective and revered professionals. And trust me, I have a lot of those people in my life. Heck, I'm married to an attorney. And I'm so, so happy to have attorneys and other professionals when I need them, right? And I absolutely do need them, a lot.

But what about the other 300-and-something days of the year when I'm not working with those people every moment? That's when the work that I do as a creative, and other creatives do, starts to really shine. Creatives, we are the fabric, the common thread that runs through all parts of life, every single day.

We create spaces and moments and memories and events and situations that are happening every hour. And I think that work is incredibly valuable, and something that most people, obviously, take for granted, including us, right?

Just take interior design, for example. These days, with our heads buried in our devices for most of the day, our home environment and the beauty we surround ourselves with, and the feelings that that environment helps us create are becoming more and more vital to our happiness than ever before.

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I mean, how many of us are feeling constantly overworked, stressed out, overstimulated and looking for peace and calm every day? Yeah, all of us. And the places we live and work, they are critical. They play a critical role in the level of wellness and self-care and mental health and wellbeing that we have.

Plus, they play a critical role in profitability and productivity and success. Yes, designers, not even talking to all you other creatives right this minute, but yeah, this podcast is for you. But just to take designers for an example, what you do, interior designers, matters.

And I know you probably believe that on some level, but if you are still a starving artist, you don't really believe it. Okay? But it's not just interior design that matters. Creative businesses, period, at the very basic level, connect us with other people through the arts, and the textiles we buy, and in our home design, and our fashion, and our architecture.

Everything, and I mean everything, that defines life, period, from its beginning of time until now and way into the future, is a snapshot of an era and what people are experiencing in those moments. Those are only captured and preserved by creatives.

Think about it. History, as recent as yesterday, or decades ago, is all defined by not only the creative work that was either part of the story then, like fashion, interiors or art. So it's either defined by those pieces, that's what we remember, right? Or, it's recorded by creatives through photography and writing and video and film.

We're on both sides of it, right? We're in the history itself, and then we're documenting and recording the history for everybody, from that moment forward. It matters, friends. Creativity matters.

And to that point, as a creative business owner, we are absolutely capable and worthy of having a successful and profitable business, doing what we love. We don't have to sacrifice and starve to be able to do those things we

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love, but it's not going to come naturally, the money. Or automatically, okay?

So, we kind of have this belief that it's going to. If it's going to happen at all, it's just going to happen. And here's what I want you to know, creative. You have to make success and profit your reality, and you have to take responsibility for it.

We have to do the deep, deep mindset work that has told us for years that inherent in the creative industry is low pay, struggle, and that artistry and money don't go hand in hand except for the handful of people who quote, "finally make it."

We have to untether those beliefs with our reality. And when we get over the hurdle that this line of work automatically comes with struggle, we step into the value of what we actually provide for people, and that's when the greatest success happens. When that happens, it's followed by higher profits.

I want you to see that it's going to be you taking responsibility, both for your mindset and the money, that gets you out of starving artist mentality. I think one of the greatest problems and mindset hurdles is this one that if my work is good enough, then I will be successful.

And then I will make money. But until then, I will continue to sacrifice my own wellbeing, and I will continue to struggle until that moment in time comes where somebody, they deem my work good enough, and start paying me as a result.

It's taking charge of our finances, and engineering profits. That has to be part of our mindset. It has to be okay. But we don't really think it is, right? We think somehow when we take charge of our finances and we engineer our profits and the financial level that we want to be at, that we want to create, and stop apologizing for it.

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And we even also have to take on the belief that even buying our way to success, in some ways, has to be okay, right? Because we have to invest in our business. But for so long, if you did that, if you took charge of your finances, or engineered profits, or bought part of your success in the way of marketing, or other experts that are going to help you grow the successful business, well, that just wasn't authentic to the arts. Right?

And on some level, we even believe that that somehow takes away from the value of the work. The work should speak for itself, right? We shouldn't have to create a business for the work to be monetized. It should just be, if it's good enough.

And I want you to see that 99% of the time, this is wrong. And in my own opinion, and my own experience, it couldn't be farther from the truth. So yes, the level of your work absolutely matters. And the better your work, the easier it is to rise to the top. The easier it is to sell it, the easier it is to put a marketing machine behind it and have success.

But it's not either/or. Either my work is good, and I make money, or the opposite, right? It's both. It's my work needs to be good and I need to put the business mindset and the finances and the marketing machine behind my work. It's really that adage of style and substance. They both matter.

It's making the business as much of a priority as the craft, or the product, or the artistry. And in many ways, if one is more important than the other, business often needs to take precedence over the artistry, so that the starving artist model is not your business model by default, right?

Because if you don't take charge of the business model piece, you just accidentally default to starving artist mode. And of course you do. Because so many of you creatives are just ignoring the business component altogether, or you're barely dipping your toe in the water.

Here's what you have to know. Creatives matter, for sure, because creatives not only enhance the human experience, but they remind us to appreciate beauty and function in both our daily lives, and in our existence

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as a whole. Right? In the legacy we leave. And yeah, that might seem heavy, but business matters too. They both matter and they both have to for the equation to change.

So, it's time to stop discounting our contribution to society. We are as valuable as other people and professions. It's time we elevate our status as creative business owners, not just artists. Our work is that important. And we do deserve to be compensated accordingly. It's not either/or.

We need to stop holding back because we don't think our work is of high impact, because it is. And we also need to stop holding back with giving our business every chance it can to succeed and to be monetized.

And the way to do that is not to just be more creative. It's to lean into the belief that if we are the best-kept secret in our industry or the world, it's our own fault. We haven't done the mindset work or the business work. We haven't done the mindset work to believe in our work, and to tackle our fears around money and charging enough.

It's so much easier to procrastinate with just doing more creative work than to step into the role of CEO of our creative businesses, and figure out what and who we need to monetize our craft.

But I can tell you this. Bootstrapping it, and trying to wear the creative hat and the business hat is not the answer. Forcing ourselves like a square creative peg into the business-minded round hole does not cut it. That just perpetuates the starving artist business model, full of feast and famine cycles. Because every time you're away from your zone of genius, which is the artistry, and over trying to wear the business hat, you are actually going backwards.

We have to be willing to envision a team or a machine behind our business that does the work to monetize our products and services. And yeah, we need to be involved in it. We've got to have a basic working knowledge of how it works and finances.

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But we also have to be willing to do some other things like drop money scarcity. That money scarcity that's inherent in our creative existence for so, so long, that starving artist mentality. We've got to be able and willing to drop that, and exchange it for abundance thinking that opens us up to embracing the genius of all those other revered professionals that we're not willing to believe we're as worthy as, but we're also not hiring, right?

So, we want to be like them in so many ways, but we don't even really value them enough ourselves. Or, we don't value ourselves enough, or both, to pay for them to help us, or believe we can afford them, right? Heck, we don't even hire our own other creative brothers and sisters. Because our beliefs say that we have to just suck it up and try to do all that work ourselves.

If I'm an interior designer, surely I can be good at graphic design, too. Or, surely, I should be able to design my own website, or my own Facebook ads, or anything else in the creative field. But y'all, we aren't. Stay in your lane, and have abundance mindset, and do the work to figure out how to work with other people, whether they're creatives or not, to build the business structure behind your business and step out of starving artist mode.

Because again, every time we step out of our creative genius and force ourselves into the roles that could be played by those others who are already a genius in those areas, we drive our businesses and our industries into the ground.

I just told someone last week, successful CEOs do not say, "We're going to accomplish so much this week, and we have \$300 to do it." Y'all, you cannot run a business for free and you can't run it on a shoestring. Successful CEOs spend thousands of dollars on their business. And sure, it's the chicken and the egg, to a point.

But the only issue is not the fact that you don't have money right now, but you aren't willing to, or have not changed your money thinking, okay? I heard Tony Robbins say earlier this year that the average American can't

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come up with \$400 extra in a crisis. And, he might as well have been saying the average creative business owner cannot come up with \$400 in a crisis.

And what I want you to know is the thing that keeps us from that \$400 is our thinking. So, changing your beliefs is imperative. And it takes a lot of work. A lot of work. And that is the very work I love doing most, on myself and with other creatives. It's the work we do here on the podcast. It's the work I do in my Design You Coaching Program. It's the business and the mindset work that has to happen.

We've got the creative part down, and can we always improve and evolve and get better? Yes. But that part comes way easier. And it's the other stuff, the mindset and the business stuff, that we've got to get on top of, or starving artist mentality will never ever change. Okay?

So, get ready. I'm bringing you a whole lot more of the business and mindset stuff, and some creative stuff, in 2020. It's going to be free stuff, it's going to be paid stuff, there's going to be all kinds of ways to get access to this.

Because here's the thing. I am on a mission, just like I said in the Forbes article, to change our creative story. And to give creatives the tools to become millionaires, more than ever before. But I'm calling on you, creatives. I'm calling on those of you who are ready to step up and be those creatives.

The ones who finally rewrite our creative legacy for good. Rewrite it so that it has a happy ending full of health, wealth, and joy. Not burnout, poverty, and suffering. It's completely up to us. And it is completely in our control.

So, are you going to join me? It is time. It is so tough. Let's do this. See you next week, friends.

Thank you so much for joining me for this episode of the *Design You Podcast*. And if you'd like even more support for designing a business and

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a life that you love, then check out my exclusive monthly coaching program, Design You at tobifairley.com.