



Chance and Choice

ELLEN GERL

I HAVE NEVER BEEN MUCH GOOD AT MAKING DECISIONS. RATHER, I'VE EMBRACED SERENDIPITY, CHANCE, AND GOOD FORTUNE OVER SERIOUS CHOICES.

The pattern emerged early.

When I was a Case Western Reserve undergraduate, my major zigzagged from sociology to geology to psychology, before landing on English and secondary education. While levelheaded classmates plotted courses from pre-med to private practice, I took up jazz piano (OK, only one lesson). I secretly envied their commitment. Why did my efforts to produce career images come out fuzzy and tilted, I wondered. Must I discard Darwin for Dickens? Study rocks, but forget poets?

My only plan was not to plan. It worked.

Today, as a freelance writer, I can satisfy my curiosity about any number of intriguing subjects. Magazine assignments have taken me into scientists' research labs and onto the Sea of Cortez to kayak among seals. Book projects find me interviewing accountants and attorneys. Sometimes the job is a family affair. For a travel piece about Winnipeg, my husband and then-toddler daughter tagged along, happy to review restaurants and tourist attractions. (Although a feature on Ohio bakeries remains their favorite.)

Over the years, I have covered topics from arts incubators to thyroid disease. Bucking an era of increasing specialization in all fields, I remain a generalist, extolling the virtues of arbitrariness. Everything interests me. Why settle for just one topic?

My route to nonfiction writer was largely uncharted as well, although I had dabbled with the craft in two articles I wrote for CWRU's student newspaper, the *Observer*. (They were about strip mining and natural childbirth; I hadn't yet learned that matching subject matter to readers' interests is a good idea.)

Even graduate school in journalism left me career-clueless, and it was serendipity more than desire that led

to public relations jobs for some eight years. One day I had an epiphany: I was not meant to organize charity golf tournaments. Fortunately, before I hopscoched into the freelance world, a mentor offered this sound advice: "Don't quit your day job."

My first magazine article described a unicyclist's successful bid to break a world-record time for cycling 100 miles. The six-inch-long article and photo netted \$240. I was hooked. Before long, I was self-employed, writing regional travel features about Ohio outposts such as Lithopolis and McConnelville.

I learned a great deal on those back roads. For instance, it's the small details that matter in storytelling and, one could argue, our lives. During one journey, I met an eighty-year-old antique dealer whose taut arm muscles came from a career wrestling reptiles, not scraping old furniture. I wrote about Midget Motors, at one time the nation's sixth largest automaker, and its two founders. The Athens, Ohio, men turned down ten orders for every one they accepted. Like their cars, they wanted to keep things simple.

The freelance life offered me time to bicycle cross-country one summer and meet people such as Melvin and Eula, an Illinois farm couple who let my husband and me pitch a tent behind their barn. They filled us up with green beans and stories all night, and in the morning shyly asked: Could we read their mail for them? They had never learned this skill. We pedaled westward, questioning what else in our lives we took for granted.

Melvin and Eula also confirmed my suspicion that everyone has stories to tell.

With a little luck, I'll write about them. 🌟

Ellen Gerl (WRC '74) lives with her family in Athens, Ohio, and has taught journalism at Ohio University and Humboldt State University in Arcata, California. She also is the author of two books on business incubators.