

## Laid Off, and Working Harder Than Ever

For months, I've juggled numerous part-time jobs. The situation is precarious—and oddly liberating.

BY JIM SCHLEY

**L**IKE MILLIONS OF AMERICANS who have lost their jobs, in early 2003 I suddenly found myself laid off. My employer wasn't a giant, downsizing corporation but a small book publisher. Two years earlier I'd had my photo in the business section of *The New York Times*, in a lead article lauding our company for exemplary "niche" publishing. Even so, after more than a decade in various management positions, I was told, "You're a fixed cost that needs to be a variable cost."

I wasn't expecting it to be so difficult to find a new job, or to be such a jolt to my self-respect. I missed seeing my name on a masthead and business card. I missed seeing my colleagues, most of whom had also been fired.

I signed up for unemployment compensation, six months of weekly checks at a portion of my previous income, and came to feel an odd warmth for the synthesized voice on the automated claims line—a fatherly baritone that intoned seven questions about my work status which I'd answer by pressing 1 for YES or 9 for NO. Responding correctly would bring another check.

Meanwhile I scoured the job listings. I threw myself wholeheartedly into applying for 19 jobs—19 carefully worded cover letters and fine-tuned résumés with references from former employers and advisers.

Each time I sent out one of my neatly printed packets, I believed I'd be called for an interview, have a meeting of minds and be offered a great position. The usual result was much different: I'd run as fast as I could and leap—into a cinder-block wall.

One evening at dinner, as my wife and daughter recounted the day's highlights, I realized that I had almost nothing to say. I'd done the laundry, made soup, planted

another garden bed ... but so what? I was basically retired. There was no way I was going to let myself be one of those laid-off men who squander hours watching TV. Anyway, we don't have a TV.

What I could see all around me were



PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSE CHEHAQ FOR NEWSWEEK

**SILVER LINING:** Though I wasn't looking for this lesson, in the past year I've discovered how valuable humility can be

part-time jobs. On top of more than 8 million unemployed people in the United States, at least 4 million people are working part-time, unable to find full-time positions. They are without benefits or a contract, paid hourly instead of a salary, but they are working. I resolved to take as many part-time jobs as I could find. I ended up juggling as many as 11 at a time. The experience has been fantastic.

I've found employment by writing (reviews for a metropolitan newspaper and essays for feature magazines); teaching (book-discussion series in public libraries, poetry programs for high-school students

and presentations for Elderhostel); performing (with a dance troupe, and on stilts with a brass band); editing (for a forestry magazine and market-research firm as well as a book about the history of bridges); painting houses; plowing snow; researching a family history; doing carpentry; house-sitting, and playing a patient for medical students practicing interviews. Knowing that I was trying to see how many jobs I could manage, my sister called one day to suggest sperm donation as a possibility—not an option I've yet explored.

To have so many jobs you need to be in the right place at the right time with the right equipment and clothes. A friend peered into my car one morning and exclaimed, "You've got more bags than a mailman!" Some days I've had four different jobs in 12 hours.

As our 10-year-old daughter was listening with an impish expression to the radio news, she said, "Hey, Dad, no wonder there's high unemployment—you have all the jobs."

Admittedly, I was better prepared than most people for such a predicament. As a college graduate who has made my living for 20 years in the arts, I've worked in editorial offices but also (to make ends meet) in restaurants, on construction crews, as a puppeteer. My wife and I live "off the grid" in a solar-electric house we built ourselves—no mortgage and a big vegetable garden—with health insurance from her teaching job. Through 13 years of marriage we've carefully avoided debt, clearing our one credit card every month, paying off our cars quickly and keeping them running beyond 170,000 miles.

This balance feels precarious, but with no savings and no offers, I was ready to take drastic action. And though I wasn't looking for this lesson, in the past year I've discovered how valuable humility can be. Humility turns out to be quite different from humiliation, and the difference is largely up to you.

Who knows? Maybe I'll never take another full-time job. As a regular employee, you're at the mercy of someone else's decisions, which might well be impetuous or idiotic. As a multiple part-timer, you're free, responsible for your own choices.

In the meantime, my short-term plan has me busy and upbeat, with plenty to recount over the dinner table.

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