

## How a Question Posed by Oprah Winfrey Planted My Travel Writing Seed

By Colleen O'Neill Mulvihill

Apples, as the saying goes, never fall far from the tree. Such was the case in the O'Neill house where I grew up. Dad was a firefighter, both career in a neighboring county and volunteer in our hometown. Our house reverberated with 24/7 sounds of dispatches to fire and medical emergencies emanating from a fire department scanner perched atop our kitchen refrigerator. To say the fire service was just about all I ever knew as a kid would most certainly be accurate.

It was no surprise to him that my brother and I both followed in dad's footsteps, much to the chagrin of our mom. When I was old enough to join the volunteer department in town, I eagerly signed up and began my training. A few years and several attempts later, I was hired into the department where I served for 31 years, working myself up to the rank of Captain.

Somewhere around my 20th year, I began to feel an unwavering stirring in my soul. It wasn't that I was unhappy about my chosen career but more the feeling that there was so much more out there. More to learn, more to see, and more to do.



I studied and became a personal trainer. I got my certification as a holistic nutritionist and then eventually my certification as a health coach. All of these things I enjoyed, but none seemed to completely soothe that stirring in my soul.

You see, even while "off-duty" or on vacation, I was never really far from the fire service. I was cautious about using my leave hours wisely, cognizant of the need to quickly return if called by my department in times of large-scale crisis, so I never wandered very far from home. I was well into my twenties before I boarded an airplane for the first time.

That had been the essence of my chosen career—the part that now looking back, I see fanned the flames (no pun intended) of my inner stirring. I had locked myself in to residing within an hour drive to work for a three-decades-long career, and something about that felt inescapable.

One sunny afternoon in May, I sat outside on my deck with a glass of wine and the latest edition of *O, The Oprah Magazine*. Glancing through pages of fashion trends, make-up tips, and self-help stories, I turned to find an article about a contest Oprah was sponsoring. I'll never forget reading these words: "If you could choose to do anything at all and get paid for it, what would you choose, and why? Tell us about it in 500 words or less, and if we choose your idea, we will help you make your dream come true!"

Up until that point, I don't think I ever let myself dream about doing other things. What would I want to do if I could get paid to do absolutely anything? I closed my

eyes as if needing to search my brain for the answer. What would it be? What would I most love to do? I honestly didn't know. As I sat with my eyes gently closed, I stopped trying to think. I simply let the answer come to me.

And come it did, like a bolt of lightning. I want to get paid to go to exotic places and write about them. I wanted to get paid to stay in luxurious hotels, to dine in the finest restaurants, to lounge by turquoise waters while sipping tropical drinks. And I want to tell everyone who will listen about how wonderful it is. THAT was what I wanted to do!

But who does that? Surely, it's a pipe dream because no one ever gets paid to do such a thing, I thought. But, what a glorious dream nonetheless.

I entered that Oprah contest with my idea. I'd love to say this was how my travel writing career started, but it was not. I didn't win that contest, but it didn't matter. I kept that dream tucked deep inside me for years because it felt so glamorous.

Several years later, I saw an ad for *The Barefoot Writer*. A subsidiary of American Writers and Artists Institute (AWAI), this program "taught freedom-filled living through well-paid writing." That amazing idea I'd once developed thanks to Oprah seemed instantly reborn. In June 2017, I entered the monthly writer's contest, and this time...I won! I'd been published for the first time ever and it felt amazing. I knew in my bones I wanted to get paid to write.

The following month I signed up for a copywriting program. I learned the art of storytelling, and the craft of writing sales copy. In the spring of 2018, I attended a copywriter's conference. The more I sat and listened to the speakers teach the ways to get people to buy products, the more I felt something wasn't quite right. I knew I could write sales copy, but truth was, I really didn't want to. This wasn't quite the dream I had imagined.

When I spoke to some of the attendees about travel writing, the answer was always the same—it doesn't pay very well. Copywriting, they said, paid big, but travel writing? According to them, "You will never make any money. You will spend a ton of your own money to travel to places, then get paid about \$10 to \$20 for an article."

Maybe this dream of travel writing really was just that—a pipe dream.

The next morning before conference classes started, I sat at an empty table for breakfast. As more people began filing in, a lady asked if she could join me. It was Lori Allen, the former director of *Great Escape Publishing*. In a moment of what felt like divine intervention, I invited her to sit down. As we chatted about our backgrounds and what brought us to the conference, I finally got the nerve to ask her about becoming a travel writer, but more specifically about what I was being told—that I would never make any money.

“Well, it’s true,” she started, and my heart sank. “You’ll likely never make the thousands of dollars you could make on a big copywriting project for a client,” she continued, “but once you get established as a travel writer, you can land press trips that pay all of your travel expenses to a destination, in return for a few articles about your stay. Wouldn’t you love to get paid to travel?” She did not have to ask me twice.

While we continued breakfast, she spoke of her travel experiences—safaris in Africa and white sandy beaches along the Mediterranean. There were cooking classes and wine tastings in Tuscany and lesser-known coffee shops in Venice. “The thing you will never get with copywriting is the travel experience. That is worth more than money, in my opinion” she said. Listening to Lori regale her stories of past travels made my heart smile. It reignited my desire to become what I really wanted—a travel writer!

In September 2019, I attended *Great Escape Publishing’s* Ultimate Travel Writer’s Workshop in Little Rock, Arkansas. I met many people whose writing I admired, and those I looked up to as travel writing icons. The vibe was different, very different than the one I’d experienced at the copywriting conference. Upbeat and encouraging, everyone I met seemed to believe in me almost more than I believed in myself. They shared all of their insider secrets and laid out a clear path to becoming a travel writer. I had all of the information. Now the rest was up to me.

After returning home, I remained encouraged while I worked at making my travel writing dream come true. By this time, I was exactly six months from retiring from my fire service career. This was the perfect amount of time to begin honing my writing craft while I still had a full-time paycheck. I made travel plans for my summer after retirement and mapped out several publications I was interested in writing for. I began pitching article ideas, and a few were accepted. I wrote my first three articles for the online publication *The Travel Belles* for free, just so I could get bylines. I was off to the races, and then—Covid-19 quite literally shut down the world.

Luckily, I’d already chosen to become a member of the *Travel Writer’s Café*. During the early months of the pandemic, it became a lifeline. Founding pioneer Noreen Kompanik, along with other seasoned writers, encouraged us to find a way to “shift and pivot” during these unusual times. With a never-ending wave of encouragement from Café members, I continued to pitch, I continued to write, and I continued to get that writing published. As of this month, I have a total of 18 published articles. Before attending GEP’s Ultimate Travel Writer’s Conference, I only had one. My single biggest advice is this—just keep going.

Although travel writing may not yet look like what I had dreamed all those years ago thanks to a worldwide pandemic, what I can say with pride is that I *AM* a travel writer. And I know if I keep going, keep pitching, and keep honing my skills that one day I will be paid to sleep in those luxurious hotels while sipping tropical drinks on a white sandy beach.

Ahh, the life of a travel writer!