

Kathryn: Welcome to episode 44 of Compass, I'm your host Kathryn Hunter. Do you want to learn from mistakes instead of being knocked down by failures? Today, Alison Gold and I talk about that and more when we discuss becoming a social problem-solving consultant. Are you ready to become location independent but aren't sure what you can do? Schedule an hour long discovery call with me, where in addition to figuring out what your location independent career will be, we also work out a plan to get you there and give you accountability along the way. Visit compasspod.com/discovery-call to book. You're listening to Compass, where we talk with location independent womxn about their work and the paths that got them there. We get into their stories of struggle and success, finding clients, figuring out what to charge, and of course, we talk money. Join us and take the next step in finding your direction. Alison, welcome to the show.

Alison: Thanks so much Kathryn. I'm thrilled to be here.

Kathryn: I like to start with your early life and see where that influences you later on. What did you want to be when you were five?

Alison: Oh, what did I want to be when I was five? It probably changed every week. The ones that come to mind were at one point I said I wanted to be a film director at one point I definitely wanted to be like an oceanographer. I wanted to be, you know, like a US Senator. And so there were always lots of things that interested me out in the world and depending on probably what I was doing in school or learning at home with my family, it changed constantly.

Kathryn: How had that changed by the time you left high school?

Alison: The truth is it really didn't change. I was just always really interested in different things in the world. By the time I was done with high school, I did get active in like local politics and I was working an afterschool job at a camping gear store in high school and had played sports and had done art and I was always sort of this polymathic kid who was interested and curious about all sorts of things around me, including stuff I wasn't very good at, to be honest with you. I was also a voracious reader and loved the outdoors myself. So there was always just this yen. I grew up in the middle of the US, outside of Chicago in a very pretty suburban area. But there was always this yen to like see more, that there was more out there and I wanted to be exposed to it and see it. And I would say that the more I learned about most traditional jobs that people tell you about, the more I was unclear about what it was I actually wanted to do.

Kathryn: Did you pursue college?

Alison: I did. And that was like my first big jump into getting to experience a different part of the world because I went to college in New York city. So having come from the middle of the country and like a very suburban area, I then went right to, you know, the center of the biggest city in the country. And that was exactly what I wanted. I wanted a place where I didn't just go to a university, that the place I was going to university was going to be a classroom for me. And so part of what I loved about college was that when I took art history classes, I got to go to the Whitney biennial. And when I took a class in

paleontology, I had to do things at the American Museum of Natural History and that I could go and see concerts in the lower East side and really just get to experience the city of New York. You know, people will say that thing about like there's the classroom education in college and then there's the social education.

Alison: And for me that was probably the social, the outside of the classroom was even more profound than what I got to learn inside the classroom. My degree in college I should probably point out is in anthropology. So when I was sitting at school I was still in this like, I'm not quite sure what I want to study. I thought paleontology was really interesting. I thought culture, like sociology classes were really interesting and as I learned that anthro, which is the study of you know, humans and our closest ancestors and how we evolve, but also how our culture and our languages have evolved. I was like, this is great. This is the academic area I can pursue that allows me to still like play in science and play in culture and media and play with art history and archeology and language. So it was the perfect place for someone who was interested in a lot of things and not wanting to decide on just one.

Kathryn: What from your studies do you use now?

Alison: Oh, well I think the greatest thing that anthro taught me was a way of being able to see systems in the world. And in the work of social problem solving, at least the work I do, I work with teams and organizations that are trying to take on big complex social and economic problems and I exclusively work on problems where issues of race and gender are at the center. So I tend to focus in the United States. And that can be anything from disparities in health or access to play, you know, or how do, how do you sort of do some recognition of the many different histories that people have experienced and reckoning with those things and healing in community in service of being able to do new things in the future. And all of that, you know, has components of the role of systems. So, the way that organizations and individuals policies and practices and that our mindsets and our behaviors all interact with each other to produce a particular results in the case of the work I do, those results are inequitable for people depending on their identity.

Alison: And the work that often my clients are trying to do is figure out how do they take apart the systems that are already in place, in order to rebuild them to produce different results that do have, that do center the issue of equity in them. And in doing that, like I just think so much of my understanding of systems of mindsets comes from the trading and anthropology. Some of the things we're also just about really like that curiosity and asking questions and getting people to try and explain what they've seen and observed. But recognizing that one person's perspective doesn't give you the whole story. And so there needs to be a lot of stories brought together and how do the stories connect with one another? And that's a big part of the work that I do also, in helping people develop a shared understanding and knowledge base of how the problems they're working on actually developed and how they show up in the world today.

Kathryn: How did you get into being location independent?

Alison: Ah, so I worked for about 14 years in traditional jobs that, you know, I went to an office during the day. I had one job at one point in my life where one day a week I could

telecommute, so I could work from my home or if I wanted to travel that weekend. And I was always someone who negotiated for more time off instead of more money because I loved traveling and I would go on, you know, two or three week trips every year during that period in my life while I was working at nonprofits or in philanthropy or in government. And I was just so alive, and you know, all those things about being curious, just were activated while I was traveling. And then I was in a job that I was just really unhappy and, and I was fortunate that one of the supports I had in that job was I got to work with a coach. And I was living out in California and my coach's name was Melissa Marr. She's amazing. And I was saying to her like, I just noticed I'm really unhappy and I also know I need to leave this job. She was incredibly supportive and I would recommend coaching, you know, to anyone who's like going through big transitions as an important active tool, know you need to find the right coach for you. And about two or three months into working together, we'd meet every other week over the phone.

Alison: I just had this revelation that I needed to step back and not jump into my next job. And it just was very clear to me that I should take some time and travel because that was the place I was most curious and alive and open. And that creating that space for myself would help clarify like what was the kind of work I wanted to do in my life next. So what I actually did first was I took a sabbatical. I call it a life sabbatical cause I wasn't going back to my same job. I was taking time off to really figure out how I wanted the direction of my life to go. And I entered into it having framed a couple of key questions. So how do I want to contribute positively to the world and what do I want the rhythm of my life to be and where do I want to call home? So I ended up traveling for close to seven months all over the world. And it was amazing because I created this space and I alternated between being in experiences where I was with communities of people either like on tours or staying in you know, like an eco village or something like that. And then other times I was very much traveling solo and just making my own way in the world. But people I'd come into contact with, you know, would ask me, Oh, are you on vacation? And I had explained what I was doing and it was just amazing how some of the people I really came to like and respect would reflect things back to me that I was open to hearing.

Alison: And so one of those was I was traveling in India, in Southern India and had spent 11 days on a food and cooking tour of South India, which was amazing and had grown really close to a very nice Australian couple in their fifties whose kids were grown and starting to have kids of their own and just really liked these people a lot. And we were sitting in the last night of this time together and the man in the couple whose name is Peter turned to me and he said, you know, I know you're on this journey, this sabbatical trying to figure out what you want to do. And I know you didn't ask my advice, but you know, we've had such interesting conversations and there are some things you've helped me really like think about totally different than I'd thought about them before. Have you ever thought about being a consultant? And it made me laugh because this is something I had heard and resisted in my life before, but I was in this place where I was just like truly open and had this sense of possibility and I think ready to hear this thing that truthfully people close to me, including my own father and one of my good friends had kind of been screaming at me for a while. Not literally screaming, but sort of making clear to me and for whatever reason, like Peter was the right messenger at the right

moment. And so that became sort of like, Oh, if I was going to build a consulting practice, how would I want to do it?

Alison: And because I loved the travel that I got to do throughout my sabbatical. One of the things that I just really got clear in my head was I wanted to be able to do it in a way that was location independent and where I could work from overseas probably for two to three months a year and then work from different locations than my home base in Washington DC for another three months of the year if I wanted to. And so that's really where it was first figuring out like what would the work be and what could this look like? But in combination that rhythm of my life question, really started to be that the sabbatical informed that having that constant exposure to new places and different cultures and you know, different types of nature and cities was just incredibly important for me. And the bonus for that was that as someone who's trained as an anthropologist and does do work on culture and possibility and openness in support of like getting people to think differently about the problems they're trying to solve, that there was a nice connection between the two that I feel comfortable sort of making it clear to clients that it would benefit them because the more activated and excited I was in the environments I was working from, the more that I would bring that into the work that we were doing together.

Kathryn: How do you describe your work to people who are just being polite when they ask?

Alison: I tell them I'm an anthropologist and usually that stops them from asking any follow up questions because those people don't know what that is.

Kathryn: And when you're talking to someone who really wants to know the details?

Alison: I explain that I am trained as an anthropologist and I work with organizations and teams who are trying to solve big problems in the world, like racism, gender discrimination, poverty, and that the work that I do specifically focuses on how, often in American culture we're really focused on the solutions and we don't take sufficient time to understand the problems and how they developed in the first place. And a lot of the work that I do with people is about helping them build that knowledge about how the problems developed and what they look like systemically and institutionally and then also building their learning processes. Because these big tough problems are not ones that like you're just going to have one solution to. It's going to take a lot of different things that you have to try out until you figure out what starts moving the needle and how can you do that and really learn, into the strategies you need to develop.

Kathryn: How have you find clients?

Alison: As I mentioned, I spent the first 14 years of my career working in traditional organizations and I worked in three different regions of the country, went to college in another one at one point I was in philanthropy and work nationally. At one point I was in the federal government and worked nationally. So I've been really fortunate that my career has always had a component of like building relationships with people. And so the primary way I find clients is that I tend to work with people I already know in some

capacity. And so, you know, I don't work on small projects. I usually have anywhere from three to about six going at any given time. And that can be in partnership with other consultants like myself who have different areas of expertise. Or it can be something I'm just working on, on my own with the client directly.

Alison: So a lot of my clients have been former colleagues, former grantees, former consultants of mine to, you know, are in different roles now and are interested in working together again. And then the second layer of it would be other independent consultants coming to me and saying, Hey, would you like to team up? And I do the same thing the other direction on a particular project. And then I think the third is people I know and like referring me and referring people to me. And that's really the mix of it. You know, I'm in a pretty niche way of working and a pretty niche focus. So in terms of this notion of how do you build knowledge and learning processes within orchid and cultures within organizations, often it's the who really know and understand my work, who are the best at seeing who might benefit from working with me.

Kathryn: Tell us about your first major struggle.

Alison: You know, it's interesting. I would say I have been really fortunate since I started my practice, which is a little over two years ago that I have not had what I would consider a struggle. I would say the thing that is always the hardest in in terms of working this way as an independent consultant, as someone who can be in any location are two things. One those moments where I realize, "Oh, this big project is wrapping up and I don't really have another big project in the pipeline to start right after it's done." And that always gives me a little bit of anxiety, although I'm getting better at it because what I've come to realize is, you know that because my relationships are so strong because the work I do is, is of high quality that if I let people, I like know that I have some capacity to work on something, that opportunities do start coming my way.

Alison: And I've had basically two or three points in the, in the two years where like there's been that moment where I was like, Oh, I have a bunch of time on my hands and no work lined up starting in three weeks. And it's always interesting how something comes together and it really kind of organic, emergent way. The other thing I'd say that has been hard, I've never lived geographically super close to my family. I would say that in the period that I've been location independent and working as a consultant, my family has gone through, not my immediate family but like my close extended family has gone through some pretty serious illness and unfortunately passing of people who were important to me. And on one hand being location independent has been great in the ability to, when I was already working in the States to go back to the Chicago area, get to visit sick relatives, spend time with them and really show up in the way that I would like to.

Alison: I think the one example I had a cousin who took ill with cancer and had a very, very fast decline and I was out of the country for two months during that three month period and did not have the chance to see her. And that was heartbreaking. I would say that's not a work struggle but it is one of the true struggles of if you're location independent and your people, your community, your family are important to you. There are trade offs of

how you maintain those relationships and keep the strength and be able to show up in the way, at least for me, I would want to show up for people I care about.

Kathryn: And how about your first major success?

Alison: I consider the greatest success that somehow for two years people have consistently wanted to hire me and I get to work on things I get to learn from, that I get to work with people that are so passionate about doing good in the world, making the world more equitable, making it more positive for the future and the fact that people actually pay me to do that and that I have the, the ability to work from extraordinary places like Japan and Sarajevo and Berlin. But also like, you know, getting to spend a week in New York or a couple of weeks in California, I consider sort of like the whole thing collectively as, as the big success of it. I joke with people, but there's a kernel of truth to it that like every time I sign a contract I, I'm just shocked this is working and I know I've done a lot of work in, you know, built my practice and my relationships for many years to be a value in this way. But it's still pretty amazing to me that like when I get hired to do stuff, it's like, Oh, people are gonna, like the world's gonna let me keep living and working this way. That's pretty, that's pretty amazing.

Kathryn: If you could start fresh today, knowing everything you already know, is there anything you would do differently?

Alison: This is going to sound a little new agey maybe to some people, but I'm a, I'm a big believer in emergence and I'm a big believer in the notion that there's never really a failure. There's always a lesson typically in something and I think that there really isn't much I would do differently than I have in these two years. Because even the times when it's been hard or where I've had a misstep, you know, I've learned a ton from it. One of the strategies that other people I knew and respected who had become consultants had told me about their early years was like, take every project that's offered to you. I felt very strongly that that was not the right approach for me. In the first year I was willing to do sort of small projects to see if they were the types of things that I enjoyed doing.

Alison: And every time I took something where like my gut told me, Oh, this is gonna be miserable. It was miserable, and maybe that's a self fulfilling prophecy. So I think that there's nothing that I would do differently because I learned from all those miserable little projects along the way about what it was that I wanted my work to be and the types of people who I collaborated with, to be. And what I didn't. But it probably would have been slightly less painful if I had more intentionally sort of been willing to say no in certain circumstances. And now I'm really good at saying no. Like almost to a degree that can be, that sometimes the like, Ooh, maybe I should have said yes on occasion.

Kathryn: Odds are there's no such thing as a typical day for you. Do you want to give us what a random day looks like?

Alison: Sure. Let's see. I mean it's so different depending on where I am. I happen to be in my home base in Washington DC this morning. Thus far today has been pretty normal and

also pretty random. You know I got up and had some breakfast and my partner lives overseas so we texted a little bit cause it's the day there and then went out for a nice little jog because the weather's beautiful. Came back, there is a, had to deal with a plumber because they is some water damage in the wall and it looks like there must be a leak somewhere and then made some lunch, called my parents to chat with them about something. And then like my afternoon into my early evening, we'll all be work related types of things. So I'm doing this conversation with you Kathryn. Like after that I have a check in with a client where we were talking about a current project, but also they want to talk about another potential project we're gonna work on together.

Alison: After that, I'm going to do a little work on my monthly newsletter, because part of the way that I keep in touch with my network of people is that every month I share a little bit about what I'm learning from the world. And often that touches on like where I happened to physically be situated or current events or something I learned or some event I went to. I also share, I have this wonderful big network of people who are hiring for jobs and recruiting consultants and you know, run fellowship programs. So I also share all those opportunities in one place. So some months it's really easy to get that newsletter done. I try and send it out the last weekday of the month. This month I haven't done any work on it yet. So there's going to be a chunk of work on that for the afternoon. And then I'll meet up with some friends and their kids and we're going to have a pizza party. Yeah, so my life's pretty integrated. I switch pretty easily between work and home stuff and if I'm at home or work and life stuff, if I'm traveling somewhere else and I really like that, I'm always a big fan of like, Oh, I can do an hour and a half of work and then you know, I'll go bake a cake or, or read outside or go and explore something else.

Kathryn: Do you keep up with any kind of continuing education, formal or informal?

Alison: For sure. In my world, because a lot of my work touches upon issues of race and systems and learning. I do a lot of continuing education around issues of racial equity. This year. The big one was I participated in for the first time in the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond's Undoing Racism workshop up in New York, in Brooklyn. I did that and that was an amazing experience. And for anyone of any racial background who is interested in really deepening their understanding of issues of race in America, I would highly recommend it. I do a lot of webinars. There are some organizations, there's one based out of Canada called The Tamarack Institute that I just think does amazing work talking about issues of community engagement and collaboration in community and social problem solving. So I love their webinars series and often do that type of session. I also recently, there's a wonderful book called Emergent Strategy by Adrian Marie Brown and Adrian and some of her collaborators have taken that book and turned it into like a in-person four day immersive experience in communities.

Alison: And I was really fortunate in July to get to do that here in DC and it was really centered on issues facing the Black community in DC and centering that set of experiences. But it was four days of co-creating and co-designing with about 60 other amazing people who were participating. And that, that gives me life. Like those are the spaces where I learned so much where I kind of feel like as an independent consultant, those spaces where it's possible to find your people are so profound. So yeah, I'm a, I'm a lifelong

learner and I'm an experiential learner, so I tend to particularly prefer things like workshops and immersive experiences where I get to contribute to like the more traditional, like being talked at, that type of way of learning. And then I see connections to what I do all around me. You know, it can be a podcast. I'm listening to a book, I'm reading a movie. I see as I said, like my life and my work are pretty integrated. So even the conversations I have with friends often touch on the very types of things I'm working on.

Kathryn: What are you excited about right now in social problem solving?

Alison: I think the biggest thing has been the, the wider recognition and movement to more deepening practices around racial equity and understanding issues of race. When I started my career, we did not talk about race. And truthfully up until, I mean I started, I worked in philanthropy from 2011 to 2014 and it was only as I was just leaving the organization that we were starting to really embark on that learning journey. And I've been fortunate throughout my career to work with people who have been supportive and patient with, you know, a white woman asking questions and seeking their guidance and which is not the way I recommend now that the internet and the world has embraced really learning a lot more about racial equity and there are so many great books and resources that are available on it. You know, that started me on a journey of recognizing my own situation, the connection of these issues to the various systems, the very institutions that I was working to change to produce different results around issues like poverty and health and the racial component of that.

Alison: And the fact that like now, you know, I get the alert from the Harvard Business Review every day and at least once or twice a week there's something that centering issues of, of race that they're writing about. I mean these are very mainstream types of places where that is coming out, not just sort of the niche world that I had been operating in for a while. And so it excites me to see that that's becoming a conversation on the flip side, you know, the conditions that are in place and things that are going on in our country in terms of the dynamics culturally, politically, that are creating the urgency around that do not hearten me. And and I think that's the constant struggle of finding like where are the bright spots when there's a lot of things that are going on in the world around me and around the work and the people that I work with and the people that they're aiming to create the systems and institutions that better serve. It's just disheartening, without getting too political. But I live in DC so it's hard not to.

Kathryn: Now, it's time to get into the numbers. What is your income range and how long have you been doing this work?

Alison: So I have been working as an independent consultant for two years. And what I would say is that this year my income range will be grossing in a little over a hundred thousand dollars.

Kathryn: What would be the beginning range?

Alison: It's really hard for me to think about it as if it was someone else's practice because it is quite specific. My consulting practice, I've never met anyone whose practice is quite the same as mine and so I don't know how it would translate for another person.

Kathryn: Where do you see it topping out?

Alison: My practice is called Optimistic Anthropology and I've never seen it being an organization that was about making the most money possible, because I really balance the idea of working with people who are passionate, who I want to work with, working on issues that I get to learn from and on projects I get to learn from that. There is a centering of issues of equity, racial equity, gender equity in them, and then money being the other part of it. So I always say sort of the equity piece is in the center and then there's a triangle around it that I'm trying to figure out the balance between the relationship, the opportunity for learning, and the money. And so, you know, I, my hope would be when I'm consistently doing this and when more people understand the work I'm doing, if I could be making, you know, I don't know, \$150,000 - \$200,000 a year from this work, that would be amazing. And if it stays around what it's going to be this year, that'll be really great too. It's never been the money that's really driven me in it because I've been fortunate that the amount of money has made it possible for me to live and have a home I love and also to be able to travel about six months of the year.

Kathryn: What goes into deciding how you price?

Alison: It really is the balance of the three things I talked about previously. So if the project that I'm talking with someone about meets the criteria of it's centering issues of equity, centering issues of justice, then really thinking about like how much do I get to learn? How much do I want to work with this person and then how much will it actually, how much time will it actually take me to do this work? I start from there. I choose, I do a project basis for pricing. I don't do hourly, I don't do a day rate. And the way that I approach that is I always basically telling people what I think it should cost and some people are like, I'm good with that and you get the okay and we move forward and just get started. And some people will come back and look at that number and it will be too high for them. And I always say that I consider the number a start of a conversation. I have a colleague and friend who told me a practice she has started using, which I'm, I've started using it as a result, which is that when people come back with that response saying to them that I appreciate that.

Alison: What I would like them to do is to read the proposal and look at what the work entails and look at what their budget is and come back to me, you know, with a number of what they feel they can do. What she has shared has been that people have come back with very, you know, reasonable and respectable numbers in terms of that. And I just tried it with the first client I've ever asked to do that. And it was the same feeling. And my whole thing is like, I never want money to be it, to be like a nickel and diming relationship or for either party myself or the client to feel like we're not being valued. And so if that's something that we can come to an agreement on upfront where we both feel like we're clear on what's expected of us and value and feel valued for the work that we're going to contribute, that makes doing the work like a more joyful experience and a more positive one.

Kathryn: Is there anything you do to keep your income stable?

Alison: There is not, I would say that it's a pretty, like, it flows in different waves throughout the year. The best thing that I've done is that in my contract agreements I stage when one billing will happen. And so I think the big part with that is that I always expect an upfront payment for work to get started. I'm fortunate that the, both the scope of the work that I'm doing and the nature of it allows me to say it's like, Oh, upfront payment. If I can often I base payment either on a monthly basis or on a project or in such a way that it's like, Oh, when this milestone is met or you know, beginning of a project, end of a project, if it's a shorter time frame. That that's the one thing I have that's like a good piece of advice. But beyond that, like in terms of the actual inflow, now I don't, I don't have something that makes it consistent each month.

Kathryn: What's your number one tip for women looking to get into social problem solving?

Alison: I have a great bias, but I think actually having experience in a community or in an issue area, doing the work is important, before trying to help other people do the work. I spent seven years of my career working in two communities on the ground. Really doing the day to day of like, you know, convening meetings and meeting with people and understanding, you know, what, what they believed and what they faced as challenges. Building relationships among them understanding the challenges in those communities and then figuring out how do we bring people and resources together to try and chart a different path forward. And that has been profoundly important to informing how I'm able to empathize with my clients and work with them. It was profoundly important for me to figure out like where my skill sets were greatest and what work really made me come to life and what work was really draining for me to do. I don't think it's just specifically for the kind of consulting that I do. It would be my advice for anyone who's going to be doing work that's consulting work is that I really think it's a such great benefit and to have had the experience of actually doing the work that your, your potential clients are doing first.

Kathryn: What are your next steps?

Alison: My next steps are I'm continuing to identify really great projects that make me excited and, and that I feel like my skills can contribute to great collaborators and continuing to build the portfolio of work that you do at Optimistic Anthropology.

Kathryn: Where can listeners find you?

Alison: Probably the best place to start is with the website, which is optimisticanthro.com that I blog there about what I'm learning. As I mentioned earlier, I do a round up of jobs people I know are hiring for consulting positions they're looking to fill, fellowships that are fully funded, and accelerators that are funded that they're recruiting for. You know, I also write about what I'm learning while traveling that relates to social problems and the other place that I would say I do a lot of that is on Instagram. Instagram for me uses pictures as the starting point, but I tend to write about like what I learned about a place I am or a cultural element or history or and share those stories. A big part of who I am as

a person then in the work that I do is about learning, but also so sharing, learning, and connecting other people to, to like the experiences. And I know it's so special to get to travel the way that I do. So I see when I tell those stories, it being an opportunity to really bring people along and giving them a little taste into another culture, another place and its history and so on. Instagram, I'm at [akgold11](#).

Kathryn: Alison, thank you so much for joining us. This has been great.

Alison: Thank you Kathryn, I really appreciate the invitation. I know my story is a little different than probably some of the other people that you've talked to, and my work certainly is. I hope that if anyone listened to this and it resonated with them or they had questions that they'll reach out, I'd love to hear from your listeners.

Kathryn: If you want your own location independent life and are eager to take that next step, join us in compass insiders where every week I send you actionable tips, inspiration, and motivation so you can take that next step towards going remote. Join us now at compasspod.com/insiders Did you enjoy this episode of Compass? If so, please take a moment to write a review. Leaving a review helps other women find us so they can find their direction too. Thank you for listening to Compass. You can find today's show notes at compasspod.com/044, that's compasspod.com/044. Join us next week when we talk with Cepee Tabibian, community founder.