

Kathryn: Welcome to episode 50 of Compass, I'm your host Kathryn Hunter. Do you need to build your personal support network? Today, Tamar Levi and I talk about that and more when we discuss becoming a children's book illustrator. I wanted to give you a heads up, we're switching to a biweekly format for the next few months. I've got some intense travel coming up and combine that with my chronic health issues and the part where producing Compass is a one woman show, and it's a lot. I also love making this show and sharing it with you, sharing these stories, so no worries, we're sticking around, just with a bit of a shift. So next episode will be February 4, see you then! 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. Tamar, welcome to the show.

Tamar: Hi, it's lovely to speak to you in Peru.

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?

Tamar: I really need to check with my mother, if I'm remembering this right. I definitely did a lot of reading. I did a lot of art and I remember quite early on spending a lot of time by myself and doing art projects by myself. Later when I was a little bit older and I was doing some babysitting, I would make books, children's books for the children that I babysat, so there was always a book element and an art element from early on.

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

Tamar: I grew up in Alaska and I left in early high school to move to the UK to a remote part of the UK and at that time I hadn't identified what I wanted to do as a career, but I definitely understood that travel was important to me. Around high school, I knew that travel was going to be a part of my life, that learning languages would be important to me, that making sure that my income had a good interest rate or passive income that supported that kind of journey. So I got involved in lots of small jobs in ways to earn part-time money in order to be location independent quite early on.

Kathryn: Did you pursue college?

Tamar: I did. I, I always did some part time work while I was studying. I don't come from generational wealth or anything that could allow my studies to be just a hobby or allow my art to be just a hobby. So I was always doing part time work as tutors or doing editing work. I got a yoga teaching qualification. So even while I was studying at university, I was still earning and I chose to study philosophy. I had gone to a school in Alaska that had philosophic content and when I studied philosophy at university in the UK, I really felt like it helped me understand pretty early on that the system is rigged. That both the academic system and the world of commerce require capital. We live in capitalism. We need capital to make our projects happen and I always knew my art projects would be important to me, so even though I studied philosophy, I made sure that I was aware of the systems I was working within and investing money on the side

whenever I possibly could to make the creative work happen too. I also want to add that after doing my university degree, I set up a small publishing house in my early twenties and I was able to access a lot of free business education as a young person who wanted to create an employment space. I was able to give myself a business education quite early on and I think that has been really helpful alongside the critical thinking I got from the philosophy degree.

Kathryn: How did you develop that business education?

Tamar: On a personal level, I learnt a lot about myself. I realized that I tend to overwork. I tend to not give myself time off and I tend to be a bit of a perfectionist. So I picked up whatever courses I could in business. But I started to realize that I wasn't very good at running a business in terms of work life balance. So I ended up selling that small publishing house and using that business knowledge to get myself employment in the corporate setting and thereby earning enough to allow me to pay for further education and pay for further time to do the kinds of art projects that I knew I wanted to do.

Kathryn: How did you get into being location independent?

Tamar: You know, I really need to acknowledge that I grew up in a family that came from different cultures and made sacrifices, changed multiple locations for different opportunities and I observed as a child how they earned in different contexts, which gave me some perspective on what a location independent family and lifestyle looks like. So when you say, How did you get into location independence? I would say I was definitely raised with a global mindset and then when I understood that I want to travel in my personal life, I was about 17 years old and had just finished high school in the U K and moved to Barcelona as an AU pair. While I was living in Barcelona, I was doing childcare and in my spare time I was painting and sketching all the time. And people started approaching me as I visited galleries and interacted with people. People started approaching me asking about my art and asking to purchase my art, so I would say that time in Barcelona where I was an English speaker, living in a non-English-speaking space and doing my art was probably my first big location independence experience.

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

Tamar: I explain I'm a children's book author and illustrator.

Kathryn: And when they want to know the details?

Tamar: I help them understand that I'm moving from being a children's book author and illustrator and moving from the publishing industry space to being just an artist. And I don't want to deceive them by saying I just sit and paint and I explain things like that involves understanding with sites and technology, business acumen and interacting with our communities and making sure I'm paying my taxes in all locations. So I say I'm in a transition period. If people really want to know, from the publishing world to a more artist's career.

Kathryn: How did you get started in writing and designing books?

Tamar: I was an avid reader as a child and an artist. I made books as a babysitter, as I mentioned earlier. And I was always interacting with people who enjoyed books, enjoyed art or enjoyed photography. So I had a quite rich visual artistic community. How did I get started in making books? I think I always walked with one foot in one direction and one foot in the other direction because I was afraid. I was afraid of getting too deeply involved and not being able to sustain myself in the creative world or in the publishing world in general. And it wasn't until tragically a friend of mine was killed that it made me realize I needed to focus on plan a. I needed to focus on my dream and really commit myself to fulfilling the projects that I want to do within this one lifetime. So I would say I got started when I reevaluated what is worth focusing my time on. And since coming here to Brussels, I've started exhibiting more in galleries. We've been here four years and I've done seven art shows. So when people come to those art shows, they tend to commission artworks if they're private art collectors. So, I would say I got started in the publishing industry many, many years ago. However, I got started as an artist who works to commissions only in the last maybe three to four years.

Kathryn: How do you find clients?

Tamar: I try to keep a balance of real life networking and online networking. I don't like to live online. But I have to be careful not to put all my eggs in the basket of the location where I'm living in case we ended up moving again. So it's really about trying to find a balance between in real life and online spaces, but sometimes they find me. I had a fantastic email a few months ago from the university of Notre Dame that said they had found an image I had done of a philosopher and this philosophy department wanted to use this image and could they pay me for this image. So that was one of the best emails of my life.

Kathryn: Tell us about your first major struggle.

Tamar: My partner and I moved from London to Berlin. I was editing as a freelancer and illustrating the first book that I was also co-authoring and I was also doing paintings to commission. And then I had started a PhD in London and set up a professional critique group for other professional authors. So I had had a really rich community of critique and a really healthy friendship circle in London and then we had to move to Athens, Greece, where my partner had to do the obligatory army service that young men from Greece have to do. So I started working two jobs in Athens and I had gone from having a really great community around me and doing a PhD in London to suddenly doing distance learning and feeling really isolated. I was amazed that the research I had started doing for that PhD won me a big financial reward. The research got an award and the money was great, but I felt socially and personally very isolated. And I think this is where a podcast that talks about location independence needs to acknowledge the mental health of constant travel. My husband was experiencing reverse culture shock, which is when someone goes back to their home country and it's changed or they have changed and I was figuring out my network, my audience, trying to understand how to price work inside the austerity crisis of the country at the time and trying to understand what is a livable salary per location. So I was also doing seven book projects. My partner

was not around very much. He was in the army and it was a very discombobulating political climate. The space of Athens, Greece at that time was a fascinating time to exist there, but it was definitely a major struggle.

Kathryn: How about your first major success?

Tamar: I would say that to comment on the mental health stuff and how I got through it and how I learned from it would lead to the success that I had got not very long after. I had understood only after leaving Athens that in both Berlin and Athens, I should have invested more time in the online communities in order to not feel so isolated. And then also to find people within my language community that could connect with me in my career or in my personal life. So once I understood how valuable the online community is, I was then able to better recognize the kind of burnout I experienced in isolation and it got me to a happier place when I recognize that all those publishing projects were exciting but they didn't motivate me to the level that doing paintings by themselves motivated me. So by really refocusing and allowing that transition from Athens, Greece to Brussels, Belgium to give me a moment to reassess what it is I'm doing and understand whether or not it's what gets me up in the morning. I think maybe that was one of my biggest successes too, to give myself that to say I'm physically moving locations.

Tamar: Let me just check everything I'm doing is what I want to be doing. And when I recognized what I wanted to be doing was more painting, it brought me to a place where I was able to share my painting and talk about my painting and gain the art commissions that allowed me to do more painting. And then I would say what I consider my greatest career success. It's actually not the publishing projects that became successful in the publishing market, but when I was back in Barcelona when I was 17 and I was trying to sell some artwork to interested collectors, then, I remember pitching a price for a painting and it was a number I had seen on the wall of a gallery and I thought that was a healthy number for the amount of hours put into making a painting. And I remember pitching that price and being really naive and not understanding that the person collecting was going to negotiate me down so much. So recently I sold a painting for the price that I wanted to pitch back in the year 2000 and I remember feeling like that was a real early benchmark for me to get that price that I had in my head is what a painting is worth.

Kathryn: If you could go back and give yourself just starting out any advice, what would you say?

Tamar: If I were not planning on becoming so location independent, I would say try to find an in real life mentor and stick with that mentor and get some guidance on how to move through an industry. If I were to know that I was going to become so location independent, I would say find the communities online, invest in the online space in terms of time and understanding. And I would also say to a younger self that the part time work that you do needs to be digital if you're going to travel. So educate yourself in a profession that can be part time work that sells at a high value while you're doing your creative work and finding your feet in the creative space. Another thing that I wish someone had told me earlier was try to find a tax advisor who understands location independent lifestyles and can take some of the stress off. I mean we all need a financial

support system and if I'd understood that earlier, I wouldn't have gotten so bogged down in where I was living and where I needed to pay tax and that at the end of the day I very strongly wish I could tell my younger self, learn more languages.

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?

Tamar: I think I'm going to tell you about yesterday. Well, what I got up to yesterday, although I don't think yesterday a particularly good day in terms of my work, I woke up with chronic fatigue because I have a child who needs middle of the night comfort and I did the child care in the morning routine, got her to school and then went to the European parliament here in Brussels. My husband is working in an office there, so I used the corner of his office to do some work. Before I had a meeting with an elected member of the European parliament, I had had an idea for an art exhibition that relates to Women's Day 2020 and I've been looking for a space or a person who wanted to support this art show and I had identified and met with a member of European parliament who is an incredible feminist and incredible politician. She's lived many lives and I thought this person might be interested in the kind of show I want to do. So I set myself up to do some work before meeting with her. I sent invoices for a live art events that I have done over the last couple months for galleries and conferences. I sent documents to my Belgian tax advisors. I made phone calls that relate to school transitions for my child and I did preliminary research for my next show. I found some sketches that I needed to find that I had scanned in from previous sketchbooks of mine.

Tamar: I needed to check that the hanging system in the gallery was appropriate for the canvases that I was working and I'm telling you all the kinds of emails that I was sending because I think things like the school transitions is a big task and things like checking in with the tax people of a country that you're staying with is also a big task. So I'm trying to just be really honest about the kinds of things I have to educate myself about, while living in a, in another country, I also send emails to you to make sure that this meeting was going to happen today and that we had everything we needed and try to do some research to understand the medical system here better in order to advocate for the health needs of my family in this country. Then I went to this meeting with the member of European parliament who received the pitch for the 2020 Women's Day event really well. I do believe that's going to go forward now. I had lunch and then worked in a cafe for a couple more hours where I sent emails to previous publishing houses to check that the promotional activities that have approached me here in Belgium, have the distribution of the books coming from the right wholesaler, in order to price it to their needs when they do those promotional activities. I sent emails to publishers regarding a charity that wants to use images from a book that I had published and then I wrote emails to my US tax advisors. So there are two big chunks of that day that were relating to Belgian tax and US taxes. I then went to pick up my child for my second shift of work, which is childcare and meal planning, cooking, cleaning, the bed routine.

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

Tamar: I have three areas that I try to educate myself in. My first one would be making sure that my art techniques are developing. My artistic practice is moving forward. I'm now

learning about website migration, that I'm moving my website from one platform to another. And the last area that I spend a lot of time learning in is whatever is location specific to where I'm living. I really like to know the history. I like to do short trips around the country. I like to learn the languages of wherever I happen to be based. And there's also issues around checking that the qualifications I have are certified as valid here in this country. For example, I have a degree in psychology. Sorry, that was my master's. I forgot to mention that earlier and I just want to check that if I want to offer art therapy here, my qualification needs to be certified here in Belgium. And so there's a lot of furthering education around learning the system of wherever we're living. And it might be also that the tax system and the legal paperwork or how to advocate for those medical needs in this country. So in terms of furthering education, I would say even though it's not super interesting on an academic level, I'm constantly learning about how to live well in the country that I'm based in.

Kathryn: What are you most excited about right now in writing and illustrating books?

Tamar: I have four exhibitions coming up after the new year, so I'm excited about the artwork that I'm working on for those exhibitions. Regarding book projects, I'm working with an art historian on interviews with other artists who work in a similar method to me and that makes me very excited. And lastly, I have to say that because I've been traveling so much, I think working in a very small format, miniature paintings, but one of the galleries has proposed that they would like very large paintings from me. So I'm very excited to be expanding those children's book illustration formats outwards onto really big canvases.

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

Tamar: So it varies from reprints of black and white line illustrations from previous books that are now going into their second edition. Those reprints might be anything as small as €40 to €90 per illustration. If it were an original illustration that was not made to commission, it should be between €350 and €500 per, I would say framed black and white illustration. However, I haven't yet had the confidence to pitch the €500 Mark and after listening to your podcast with Bari Tessler talking about feelings around money, I've been really inspired to interrogate why I don't have the confidence to negotiate my price upwards. Yeah, I want to say that it's really important in illustration in the income range to make sure that you're diversifying your clients because you don't always have repeat clients and when I do a live art event, for example, I might ask for €1000 to 1,500€, but I need to be aware of where that art event is based and whether or not that client will repeat work if I've pitched it too high. It's a very delicate client negotiation.

Kathryn: What would you say the range would be for someone just starting out?

Tamar: So for illustration, for book illustration, I'm a member of the association of illustrators, which is based in the UK and they argue it should be between €90 for a half page to €1,000 for a full page of a, of an illustrated publication. However, as I was saying earlier, the clients always negotiate and I've spoken to other artists who are in advertising and brand consultancy and they've told me that this negotiation never stops. It's very

frustrating that no matter how many years you're doing it, you're still negotiating as if you have not been doing it that many years. So another problem is if you're working in modern publishing, you tend to be delivering your work digitally, which means that you are on a, in a global market and artists from all over the world can undercut each other. So the beginning income range does have a recommended price as per the union of the country that I started in. However, I would say, again, it depends on the client and how well you can negotiate based on your relationship with that client. I would argue that you need to check what their budget is if possible and use a price calculator that belongs to a union, like the association of illustrators to check what's going on in the market to make sure that your quotation is within range for what is being sold at that time.

Kathryn: Where do you see it topping out?

Tamar: I think that top income depends on how productively you can sell work, which tends to be digital work because it's time saving work and it depends on who your clients are. Publishing will always pay less than a corporate space or an advertising space and salaried is very different than freelance. So recent freelance surveys have shown me that no matter how many years of experience you have, your income is not significantly increasing over time as a freelance illustrator. So I would expect, but if you didn't have childcare hours as I do and you were working full time and you had repeat clients who are at the higher end of the price range spectrum, I would expect that someone should be earning about €30,000 per year for freelance work, without other income sources.

Kathryn: What all goes into how you decide your pricing?

Tamar: It really starts with client meetings, understanding their budget, understanding the length of the project and recognizing whether or not there's repeat work with that same client and acknowledging that with them that if you're going to have an ongoing relationship, that you're willing to make sure that your prices fit their budget in a way where you're both more comfortable. Being aware of what it costs to live in the location that you're living in at that time. So being familiar with the budget of costs in your location helps you understand what to charge. Checking with unions, this is super important to make sure that you're not undercutting everyone else in the industry and of course common sense. Calculating your expenses and how much exposure. For example, I've been invited to do an art event for the TEDx conference that's coming up here in Brussels and so I really need to understand what level of exposure is important to me compared to what kind of pricing I'm going to discuss with the organizers. And there is a point where you need to learn how to ask for more money, but you also need to understand in the negotiation with the clients what feels right for whatever economic context they are in.

Tamar: So for example, I received a call from a friend in brand consulting who was calling me from Ulaanbaatar and he pitched a project to me and we were working on this project and we came to a number that we felt, felt right. It took into account respect for the experience we both have in the industries and understanding what the Mongolian economic situation is and that we would be at the higher end of the price range for the clients in Mongolia. What I'm trying to say is that no matter what unions or negotiations you have in your head, there is point that feels right in conversation with the client. And

I want to say to be more optimistic, talking online in illustration communities or in publishing communities, talking online together with people who are making a living in the art world can help us have a level of transparency with each other and make sure that we are budgeting things correctly for ourselves and I hope that that will make incremental changes towards higher pricing in the industry.

Kathryn: Do you have any suggestions on how people find groups like that?

Tamar: It might depend on what kind of illustration you're interested in doing. If you are doing nonfiction and it's very technical, I would say those niche areas are easier to find in a way. When I first started out, I remember there was a group of young publishers, it was a club or a society that was in London. I had a friend who was in that club and I remember thinking that's a place where I can have interesting conversations about what's going on in the publishing community. And then I learned about a group which was women in publishing and this was all pre internet community or at least it was very early days Twitter. And so it really required me to get up and go to community spaces and make sure that I was present while people were talking about the industry. In terms of finding the online communities, I really like being involved in social media on a personal level. I do have a Facebook professional page, but I really like interacting on my personal page in groups where people are talking honestly to each other as person to person conversationalists and being really transparent about where they're going, what they're doing, what they're earning.

Tamar: And the way that I find those groups tends to be often based on either what location I'm in. For example, Foreign Mothers in Athens was useful to me and then maybe more specifically Creative People in Belgium. Now is a good example. Finding groups through the search engine with the keywords that relate to how you identify. If you'd like to work within the location specific parameters, then those groups are going to have the location and a title. If you want to work within the industry and try searching those keywords. And I would say in those groups, be interactive to just be a creepy lurker who is reading everything and not engaging in conversation. Try to be helpful. Try to answer questions when you can and I'm hoping that this website that I'm building now, is going to be a place where I can blog about the kinds of questions that I've been having as I've traveled through Europe and worked as an illustrator. Questions like which postal delivery service reliably delivers artwork and which print on demand services also do posting and which art directories are helpful to people being an artist in Europe.

Kathryn: What, if anything do you do to keep your income stable?

Tamar: As I was saying earlier, I studied philosophy and I think that really helps me understand that the system is not going to be working for me. We live in capitalism, we need capital to do our projects and whether that's property or art projects or whatever, you need capital. So from really early on I was always doing part time work and every time I earned more than how I was living, I would invest it in a way that gave me some passive income or gave me some assets that would then increase in interest over time and allow me to do more art projects. So in terms of income stability, I would say to someone starting out, make sure you have part time work, preferably digital that supports your creative projects and live humbly with roommates or with flat shares with not

extravagant lifestyles, In order to take the profit margin and invest it back into yourself, into your creative projects and provide capital for whatever inspires you artistically. What's your number one tip for women looking to get into book illustration? I think the number one tip that I would like to offer young people or people pivoting into the art industry is to make sure that you are aware the education industry is not always informing you with transparency about the profession, about making a living in the arts, being aware of getting the information on a practical level or how to be an artist is as important, if not more than the theoretical that you tend to get from educational spaces.

Kathryn: What are your next steps?

Tamar: As I was saying earlier, I'm really excited by these four art exhibitions that are coming up. One is these giant landscapes, giant canvases, excited to try my hand up. Another one is for a charity and I want all of the proceeds from all of my artwork for that exhibition to be going to that charity. Another art exhibition is the women's day one Women's Day 2020. That one is going to require a lot of, a lot of hard work, but I think that I might do something within a similar theme to what I would create for the TEDx conference. So I hope it not to be a completely creatively independent project. Oh. And the website migration is a big project. I need to move from one platform to the next another, and I need to just get all my blogs down that answer the kind of questions that I want to know as an artist here in Europe.

Kathryn: Where can listeners find you?

Tamar: I'm working on this website tamarlevi.com which is under construction, but I am also on Facebook as a professional page at Fine Art, Tamar Levi. But I prefer to interact as myself on Twitter or on Facebook, even though I've got the website and the professional page and the LinkedIn and the Instagram. I really like to be in a personal space, so I'd really like it if people connect to me on a personal level too.

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

Tamar: Thank you for your time, Kathryn. Have a fantastic time in Peru.

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/050, that's compasspod.com/050. Join us next time when we talk with Lili Tanis, video coach.