

On cultivating resilience



Critic and screenwriter Hunter Harris discusses standing firm on your opinions, developing a self-assured voice, and managing your inner critic.

December 14, 2023 -

As told to Sarah John, 2322 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Film](#), [Beginnings](#), [Independence](#), [Day jobs](#), [Inspiration](#).

I've always found it interesting how self-assured your voice is. You're never timid in your writing. How do you build the confidence to do that?

I don't know that there's an easy answer to that, other than I have two very strong-willed parents. I was raised by people who are very emphatic in their arguments and ideas. I was always inspired by people who seem to have a clear idea of what they think and stand on it absolutely. We're kind of in a mood on the internet right now where you have to be nice about everything and you have to like everything. You only talk about things that you can praise.

I don't want to be a writer who hates on things unnecessarily. But I do think that if I don't like something—if I think that something is unjust, cowardly, or unclear—then it is my job to write why I feel that way. Part of making a compelling argument is to have convinced yourself of it first.

Can you elaborate on how you convince yourself of an opinion? What does that process look like for you? When are you sure of an opinion?

I just am. [laughs] I don't know. I mean, in my personal life, I'm much less certain about everything, but when I'm watching, reading, or listening to something, I have a pretty clear sense of what I think is working and what I think isn't. You kind of know it when you feel it.

There are certainly times when I am watching a movie and I'm thinking, "I don't really know if this is good." Or, "Is this very good?" That's usually a pretty quick way to think, "Oh, it's probably not. If something that I'm watching is good, I don't have to think about it. I'm not ever self-conscious about, "Is it good or is someone bullshitting me?"

It's so much worse to me to pretend to like something that I truly do not care for than to be honest about what I think the shortcomings of something are, and then have someone get mad at me for that. I feel internally bad if I'm being more tepid in my opinions. I've been wrong about things before and I'll be wrong about stuff again, of course. But I do feel like I really have to honor my first impression or impulse of something, because it's usually more right than it is wrong.

I think that's a good way of putting it. Everyone has that first impulse, but then all the other things get in the way.

Yeah. It's hard in profile writing. I definitely have profiled people whose work generally I like, but maybe the most recent peg or the new release is not very good. You kind of have to talk around it. But, I don't know. You just can't let other voices in your head. Especially as a critic, when the thing that people want to hear is a

critic's opinion of something.

Yeah, that's helpful for me honestly, too, as a critic.

Well, I'm glad. I'm glad I'm not just truly talking out of my ass, so that's perfect.

You really made it, I think, a priority to own your own writing with the Substack, and deciding to leave Vulture. You've been really good about building an independent identity aside from any one publication. Why is that so important to you?

The reality is that media is very fickle and unstable as an industry. There are stories that I wrote just three to four years ago that don't exist on the internet anymore. It was the idea that I am devoting my life to writing, and it could all be gone tomorrow. It's just sort of a preservation component. Like, "Oh, it is kind of important to me that these things can last in a place that I am in control of."

The other part of making myself more independent of one single publication, is that it always seemed like a thought trap to me to take some of my personal meaning or worth from working at New York Magazine. It's a place that I love and loved when I was working there. But, in the back of my mind, I always kind of felt like, "Am I being invited to this or asked about this because I'm Hunter, and someone appreciates and values what I have to say? Or because I represent this really impressive legacy media organization?" The older I got, the more it became important for me to not fall into that.

Otherwise, logistically, there were just sort of things that I wanted to do in my career that working full-time at New York and Vulture wasn't really conducive to. If I wanted to think about a podcast, or if I wanted to explore writing for TV. All of those things could not exist while I was always working a nine-to-five. Then in terms of the workflow of it all, I would just be a host, and not a real creative partner in the thing that I'm making.

It is nice to be your own boss. I get to decide the deadlines, all that stuff. It does feel very satisfying in a way that I didn't really expect.

I've been thinking a lot about the writer strike. Just in general in the arts and creative fields, there's this theme of exploitation. What advice do you have for younger creatives about setting boundaries, self-advocacy, and the like?

I was speaking to a class at NYU a couple weeks ago, and they were asking what advice I would give my younger self. I think probably the biggest [piece of advice] is that not every editor or superior is actually looking out for you. I've been really lucky to have editors who are interested in my development as a writer, especially when I was younger. But there are some editors who are not that way, who really have a quota, or an assignment, or a need that they really need met. [Ultimately], a "hate clique," and an "I love this so much, it's so smart clique" make the same amount of money.

It's just being a little bit more conscious of, "Is this person actually invested in my growth or are they really just trying to push out, and I hate using this word, content?" That is an internal check-in that I think any person, but especially someone young, should be doing all the time. A lot of this is stuff I'm still trying to navigate for myself, honestly. There are times when I'm like, "Am I working too hard and doing too much? Should I relax?" Or there are times when I'm like, "I really need to actually kind of step it up." I'm always trying to figure out what is normal and healthy versus what is unhealthy.

The most important thing for me has been being in rooms where you're not the smartest and where you have a lot to learn. Also, knowing when I'm not being served by something or when I don't feel very respected or challenged, too. You kind of have to decide that for yourself.

How do you find your own unique audience and the people you want to connect to? When do you know that?

[For [Hung Up](#)], I think there are a lot of economics of having a newsletter right now. Especially on Substack. I feel very buoyed by the network of other newsletter writers. A rising tide lifts all boats, so I love linking to other people and other people linking to me. I think that's a really great way of growing the newsletter's audience. I mean, I just really like good writing. I like people who think about things in a way that I hadn't considered myself.

One of my favorite newsletters is Heather Havrilesky's [Ask Polly](#). Then also [Ask Molly](#), which is kind of the B side to* Ask Polly*. I read Heather's writing and I'm like, "I could never do this. I could never be so raw, vulnerable, and also kind of moody and mischievous in a certain way, on the page." I think the same thing happens with [John Paul Brammer](#).

I just kind of find people and I know immediately that I like them, and I know immediately that I want to be friends with them. I know immediately that, "Oh my gosh, we have so much in common and so much to share. I have so much to learn from you, just as a peer."

Breaking into a creative industry can feel very frustrating. How did you deal with disappointment or failure during the early years of your career?

I think sometimes I feel like I am the most sensitive person in the world.

Same.

Other times I feel like I'm pretty not sensitive and just let everything roll off my back. I think that what has been truly the best way to get over anything is just to start thinking about the next story. There are times when I thought something would be so major, and then no one cared. There are other times when I'm like, "This is so ridiculous and stupid. I just need to get this out the door." Then that's the stuff that people liked the most and wanted to share. My focus is always, "Okay, well what's the next thing and how am I going to top myself or improve myself?" Always keeping my focus on a goal that was a little bit ahead of me has made a lot of disappointments not that disappointing. Or really, then I just kind of can't dwell on it.

It's not that I'm super optimistic, but I'm always trying to find a silver lining. "Maybe this story wasn't what I wanted it to be, but it can get me to the next stage, or the next step." My second year at *Vulture*, I started doing a lot of red carpet reporting at events. It is both the most fun and the most awful, horrific work. You have 30 seconds, and you're trying to think of a funny question to ask Helen Mirren, and maybe she'll get the joke, and maybe you can translate that into a funny [piece.] The way someone says something is sometimes very hard to communicate. Maybe it was funny at the moment, but when you're reading it, you're kind of like, "Ah. Whomp, whomp."

That was just really hard work to do that was really thankless and a lot of late nights—a lot of going to bed at midnight, waking up at 7:00 AM to write something, and then having a full day of work after that. Then doing it all again the next night if it's a work season. Sometimes it was really, really personally disappointing, and I was so mad at myself for not giving the best story of the night or something like that. But all of that work is what made me better at being a field reporter and reporting on set, like on the set of *Succession*. All of those little stories, disappointments, triumphs, and everything gave me experience that was super helpful for 20 other stories I wrote down the line that I actually really wanted to do. It's keeping that perspective that has made a lot of disappointments not so bad.

What do you do when you need inspiration?

When I feel frustrated, I take a shower or I take a nap. If I'm feeling in a rut and need to get out of my own head, that's the quickest way. I feel like a midday shower can do things for you that you would never expect. Those are the two things that really are an express lane back to myself. Just feeling very present in my body.

If I need inspiration, I'll probably just watch a movie or an episode of *Atlanta Housewives*. I mean, talk about

people who are not tepid, who really stand on it every week! I think everyone I know can always tell if I've watched* Real Housewife*s, because I just have a little bit more of an attitude. Just watching someone feel so impassioned and powerful, something that I feel so activated by, is always inspiring.

What is the scariest part of being a writer for you, and how do you overcome that?

Oh my god, just writing something stupid, honestly. I mean, it happens all the time. I write stuff that I'm like, "This is stupid." Sometimes I'll even ask my friends, "Is this stupid or is this funny? I really don't know." I sometimes am so caught inside the joke that I'm making that I'm like, "Can anyone else actually understand what is funny about this? Or am I just truly losing it?" I think that's it. I guess I'm always trying to impress, or not disappoint, an audience of one, who's me. I am definitely the most critical, the least generous, and the least forgiving of my own work.

I think also what's hard is knowing when to let something rest. It is much worse for me to spend a day chained to my desk trying to get something written down, than to simply step away from it for even a couple hours and then come back to it. It's just so much more productive coming back with fresh eyes. Knowing when to do that is hard, but definitely necessary for me.

Hunter Harris Recommends:

[Rhode Peptide Lip Tint in Rose Taupe](#)

[Sandy Liang x Little Beast](#) puffer

[Agolde Nova Tank](#)

[iS Clinical Warming Honey Cleanser](#)

[Shin + Na Reversible Bucket Canvas Tote](#)

[Name](#)

Hunter Harris

[Vocation](#)

critic and screenwriter

□