

On staying inspired



Journalist and Filmmaker Gabriella Lewis discusses doing what you love to do, listening to your inner child, and remembering to keep going.

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As told to Colleen Hamilton, 2351 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Journalism](#), [Failure](#), [Beginnings](#), [Education](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

You're a journalist, filmmaker, DJ, and recipe developer. Is there anything else I missed that you would describe yourself as?

There is one more recent addition to the already comically long list, but I'm also a Professor. I teach a journalism course at The New School where students learn the fundamentals of docu-style video production and storytelling with food as the main focus. Teaching young people is an incredible experience. I never think of myself as any of those things singularly, though. When I was younger, I had a perception of adult life demanding that your interests centered around your job, but I've reached the point where I just want to do it all. My partner will introduce me as an artist, and I'm like, "I am not an artist!" even though I guess in some respects I am that, too.

Why do you think you're hesitant to do that?

It's a combination of factors. I prefer to be called a creative. It feels more limitless, though I deeply admire and respect artists. After spending years around true capital A Artists, it's clear that their work is innate and comes from within, almost as if they can't help but let it flow out of them onto a canvas. I'm constantly inspired by the things around me so my approach to creating feels more like taking in information, synthesizing, reinterpreting, and then creating something out of that, whether that's a recipe, a mix, or making a documentary.

Do you feel like you've had moments where you've been like, "I'm an artist"? Has that label ever felt true to you?

I guess one could say that recipe development is a form of making art that I indulge in. It's extremely relaxing for me. It's a creative outlet that also quite literally feeds me. Ingredients are my tools, colors, and inspiration. I listen to them and let them tell me what to do. It's funny because I don't usually follow most recipes, but I do love creating them for others. However, the focus is always encouraging folks to cook in ways that feel intuitive to them. When I'm cooking or recipe-developing, I feel the most like an artist.

Do you feel like there are any common themes that you're finding yourself exploring across these different mediums?

I'm very interested in the intersections of things. For me, that often means the intersection of food and something else. So, food and queerness which I explored in [the queer cookbook zine] [PLAY](#). Or food and music, which is the focal point of [my newsletter] [Turntables](#). Another theme is curiosity. Being a journalist, you have no choice *but* to be curious. You're constantly asking yourself why things are the way that they are, what something means to its community, and who benefits. I'm so happy to have found a job where I can be curious all of the time.

What does that curiosity look like, specifically when it comes to video projects?

I'm a sensory, tactile type of thinker. I like to envision: What does a space feel like? What does it smell like? What do the people who have worked in this industry for a long time look like? What do their hands look like? What do their clothes look like? As a visual storyteller, what I'm looking to portray is in the details. I also adore grocery stores. They are my favorite places on Earth. When I'm traveling, I'll look up a local grocery store or farmer's market and just peruse the aisles. Many video projects I've been lucky enough to create have stemmed from walking into a store, whether that's in Brooklyn, Oakland, or Seoul, and letting myself get curious.

What does a typical week look like for you?

I spend the bulk of my weekdays working a demanding but endlessly rewarding 9:00 to 5:00, which I love and is a dream job in many respects. I help lead a team of super-talented visual storytellers and journalists who tell stories about the food we know and love and the people behind it. It's one of the hardest jobs I've worked, but truthfully I've never been happier or more fulfilled. It's important to turn off one's work brain and pivot to creative outlets post-work, so my after-work hours consist of anything from ideating for the next issue or future events of *PLAY* to grading papers and preparing a lesson plan or playing a DJ set into the wee hours of the morning somewhere in Brooklyn. I also try to do most of my socializing during the week because come Saturday and Sunday, I'm inside resting.

How do you find moments to creatively recharge?

Saturday and Sunday are all mine. I aim to not plan anything unnecessary or that isn't re-energizing. My social battery gets drained quickly during the week so I need at least one full day of solitude to recalibrate. I like to read, listen to things, go on walks, develop recipes, or catch up on what I miss throughout the week. My home is my safe space. I spent not an insignificant amount of time making sure it was a little nest where I felt comfortable to both create and rest. Saturdays and Sundays are where my mind can really expand, where I'm not overstimulated or distracted.

I feel so seen! We don't talk about needing those days enough, specifically in New York City.

Totally! At times there's a deep guilt about being an introvert here. I love the idea of being an extrovert, but the more I force myself to [be extroverted], the more of an introvert I become. I've reached the point where I only do what feels right. If I don't feel like doing something, I don't do it. I'm very lucky to be able to do that, but for a long time, I forced myself to be in spaces, hang out with people, or go to events that I wasn't aligned with for one reason or another, and I wasn't better off for it. I was more tired or I didn't prioritize something I should have prioritized. Getting a little older, you learn about the things that serve you and re-energize you. Being introverted or a homebody is a superpower in many unseen ways.

You were part of the Gen Z-Millennial cusp that started to integrate video and journalism work. How did you get on that path, and did it feel like a risk? When you started 10 years ago, it was not the kind of obvious thing that it has now become.

I knew that I wanted to be a journalist when I was fairly young. I don't think I fully knew what that meant, but it sounded fun. The older I became, the more I realized that path was daunting. I'm the daughter of an immigrant, neither of my parents got their bachelor's degrees, and they certainly didn't know anything about the media industry or New York. Yet, I still had a dream to be a journalist in New York. I didn't know what that looked like, but I had a dream, the internet, and a lot of student loans, so I was like, "We are going to make it work!" That's how it all started.

I graduated college with a degree in Journalism during the peak of the pivot to video era. I knew how to report and write, but I didn't know much about filmmaking. I learned on the fly. I was obsessive about connecting with people who worked in video and letting them know about my interests. If an opportunity for video production came up, I said yes. Everything from sketchy freelance jobs to helping friends create short films or working weekends—I did it all. In hindsight, that era was what ignited the path I'm on now. It was a very winding path and didn't

always know where it was headed, but I knew it was in the right direction.

I'm curious how you navigate some of the less fruitful aspects of the tumultuous changes of media, and choosing a creative path in general. It's never going to look linear.

I was lucky enough to land a job right after college. It wasn't necessarily a dream job, but it was a media job. To me, that was everything. I was so hungry to get in and learn. But within three months, I was laid off. It was devastating and felt like a failure, but it was the wake-up call I needed. The media industry is wholly unpredictable. That experience made me realize that defining your worth based on where you work is unhealthy. It's the work itself that matters.

Companies are the parts of the whole that make them great, and we are the parts. You don't need to work for a media company. You don't need to work for a corporation. You don't need to work for anybody if it doesn't suit you. I realized that my work is what is going to fulfill me, not where I work. Most creative careers aren't linear, but that is one of the best parts about being in a creative field. You have to lean into the uncertainty of it all while also continuing to build community. Tell people about your ideas so that they know how to support you! Tap your friends whose work you admire, hire them, and collaborate with them!

Within video journalism, how did food become your focus?

Truthfully, I didn't entirely understand what food media was when I was an undergrad, so my path to it was accidental. A couple of years into my career, I joined a video team that covered a wide range of topics for magazines focused on fashion, tech, music, architecture, and food. From day to day, I could be assigned to a video about science and then have to pivot to developing a show for a cooking personality. While assigned to a video tied to one of the food-focused magazines, I had an A-ha! moment. It was the first time I was able to tell visual stories about food and work with people who had a culinary background. I've always had a deep curiosity about how things are made, specifically edible goods, and it's always been a secret dream of mine to be the Afro-Latina version of Alton Brown from Good Eats. Working with people who knew how to reverse engineer a recipe, explain The Maillard reaction, or take us behind the scenes of how food-scented candles were made was like watching a magic show. I was hooked.

What's the career decision you were most afraid to take? How did you encourage yourself to take the risk? And looking back, did it feel worth it?

Deciding to work in food media with no formal food training. Having experienced food insecurity early in life, it felt like a big risk at one point. In many ways, it was a boot camp for class and wealth, and I quickly had to get over my insecurities about not belonging in order to grow. In hindsight, it made me a better journalist and storyteller. Harnessing that lack of knowledge or familiarity fueled curiosity. I held my inner child close at the beginning of that process and wondered, what would this person want to learn about? It prompted me to press subjects to elaborate on why we use certain flours, why we blanch our vegetables or the best ways to get the most out of a single ingredient—all because I was genuinely curious. At first, it felt like a big risk exposing my lack of experience, but my childlike curiosity about food ended up being a huge asset.

What do you consider failure, if anything, and how do you find success in it?

Failure is such a big word. I suppose that not going after what you want can be seen as a failure. If you're not spending time doing what you're excited about, you're failing yourself. But if you're trying, you're successful. It's the creative interpretation of Newton's First Law of Motion. A body in motion stays in motion. There's a natural momentum to all of it. Once you start moving towards the thing, it is only a matter of time before you get there. Give yourself the opportunity to show what you're capable of. You'll surprise yourself every time.

What advice would you give to your 21-year-old self?

Love yourself sooner. See in yourself what everyone else sees in you. Tell people what they mean to you. Make

more art. Speak up and speak louder. Stop thinking about yourself so much.

Gabriella Lewis recommends:

Richard Mosse's film, "Broken Spectre." Projected across a 60-foot-wide LED screen in lower Manhattan, Mosse's dream-like video installation was unlike anything I've ever seen. The 74-minute film documents the mass deforestation of the Amazon from 2018 to 2022, utilizing a captivating array of photographic techniques like hypnotizing fluorescent microscopic imagery, a bird's eye view of the environmental damage, and cinematic monochrome infrared footage. It was a striking and devastating version of Brazil I hadn't yet seen.

Ana Mazotti's album *Ninguém Vai Me Segura*. I came across this album during the early summer of 2020 as I was particularly struck by Mazotti's cover of Roberta Flack's "Feel Like Making Love." The rest of the album immediately hypnotized me. It's the perfect soundtrack for the transition of seasons.

Everything and anything chartreuse-colored.

Teenage Engineering's Medieval Midi Sequencer. I recently bought this for my partner and found myself sneaking away with it to create music when he's not looking. The built-in Dark Age-inspired sounds and the thematic design are unusual and addicting. Having previously been a harp player, but more recently transitioning to creating and mixing music digitally, this midi board scratched the right itch.

Som Tum Green Papaya salad. It's sweet, it's savory, spicy, crunchy, and refreshing. I could eat it every day.

Name

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Vocation

journalist, filmmaker, professor, DJ, recipe developer

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