

On integrating motherhood and creativity



Musician Daniela Gesundheit discusses the transformative and healing power of music, seeing both now and what came before, and learning new forms of community.

October 4, 2023 -

As told to Adrian Inglis, 2492 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Poetry](#), [Identity](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

When did you discover your connection to music?

My mom has shared with me that the first words that I said out loud, I screamed. I screamed before I talked, and my own personal earliest memories of speech and language were singing. I remember learning how to read and singing the books out loud, treating every book that I read as a libretto and making up melodies to sing whatever I was reading out loud. That feels like the origin story, any text is fair game to animate with song.

That's so beautiful. Do you still sing books?

Yeah, if I'm reading something that inspires me, it revolves in my head as a melody. And sometimes I'll turn it into a song, and borrow a line or cite a line in a song. More often than not, it feels almost like a mnemonic device. I definitely sing books to my twin babies. I hear melodies even just in spoken language, and I think we learn the intonation and inflection, that's all part of communication and some languages have that more than others.

What does your creative practice look like right now and how has your relationship to creativity changed, as you change? I'm particularly thinking of your recent plunge into motherhood, if you're up for talking about it!

I don't think I can ever not talk about motherhood ever again. I wish that I had access to some compartmentalization, but that's totally over for me. I currently feel that I am in the process of completely rebuilding my creative process, that I let it go very fallow while I was pregnant, and the first year of the babies' lives. I brought a couple of projects to fruition during that time, but the creative spark part of the life cycle had already happened, so I was just tying the bow on those and making sure they saw the light of day. In terms of new sparks of creativity, I think it was Marilyn Robinson who has the line in her book, *Gilead*, "He participated in being without remainder," and I feel like that's where I've been in the last two years. The pregnancy was such a physical challenge, I became total animal, I had no spirit life, I had no remainder after just being the animal that I was, growing the two animals that I was growing. After being basically a vegetarian for many years, I wanted steak for breakfast, I had to make so many accommodations, and I was so physically uncomfortable that that was it for those nine months. And then for the first year of their life, with two newborns, that took every bit of my creativity and my physicality.

They had their first birthday in January, and we have an extraordinary child care worker helping us a few days a week. Eric is taking on a bit more during the day with the babies, so I'm having this opportunity to remember

what came before or what is now. It's daunting and exciting, I feel like I'm having tea with an old friend. Eric and I share a studio space that was his old apartment in Pasadena before we became a family together. The living room is his zone, and the bedroom is mine. Over the last few weeks, I've started getting my studio space together, it was just piles before that, piles of forgotten tools.

Does it feel like you're picking up where you left off, or more like rebirth, fully fresh?

It feels pretty fresh. I think I've been avoiding—I know which folders have the old lyrics and the old ideas and I've intentionally not been opening those quite yet. I've never used this space as my studio before, I always had my studio at home for the last many years. So now it's a brand new space, and it's out of the house, so there's a lot that feels fresh and new.

As you're setting up your space, what energetic or physical conditions are conducive to your creative flow?

I am thinking about that a lot and I'm not sure yet. Right now I'm really drawn to ultra organization, which seems antithetical to creative flow, but for some reason, it's what I need right now. I think it's probably in contrast to the chaos of living with two toddlers. One thing that comes with me in my bag every day to the studio is my handheld label maker. I'm like, I'm going to bring order to this space. I think I tend to act in contrast to whatever space I'm in. I don't headbutt the space that I'm in, but wherever I am I look for it's opposite when I'm working. I have this feeling that once my environment feels ultra ordered and organized, that I'll be able to feel like I can create chaos and loosen within that space. I'm currently making the clarity, and I'm really looking forward to making my own mess instead of cleaning up two toddler's messes.

Where do you seek inspiration?

Books, poetry primarily. If I have enough books in my space and I can just flip to any page and find something I didn't know I was looking for, that's usually a happy start for me. Listening to music as well, but sometimes when I'm in a deep writing mode, I can't have a lot of input musically, it scrambles the line a bit for me. Generally, I love music for accompanying me throughout my day or when I need to move emotion somewhere in my body. If I can feel that something's quite stuck then listening to music can release or move that emotion. But for writing music, I need to not have that input. Where else, creative inspiration? A long walk where I can just observe and meander a bit.

You just mentioned using music as a way to move emotion through the body. Do you see music as a tool for healing? Can you talk a bit about the ways that music heals?

The very simple answer is yes. Even just knowing that singing, through its stimulation of the vagus nerve, literally helps move grief from the body. When I started using music as a tool for healing for myself, I had no idea that that's what I was doing, I just was magnetized to it. And I was so young, I was 14 when that began for me and there's no way I would've known that that's what I was doing. For me, it absolutely has that ability and I think in my earlier years of making music, I felt almost ashamed of that ability, that it was often mocked or poked fun at in music, at least the music circles that I was in. Like university programs, and also as a touring musician in the 2000s. A harder shell was required to survive there, so I felt a lot of secrecy and shame about what I knew to be true about music's ability, and that it did have a different palette of value than just entertainment. I always knew that, and I was always incorporating that into my shows, into my writing, into my albums, but I didn't feel safe enough to talk about or show that directly. Now, after 20 years of making music professionally, it's undeniable. Time and time again, I've experienced that transformative quality of music, and I've seen it happen for other people so many times that it's such a fact to me now that I have a hard time imagining a time in my life where I was trying to not disclose that fact.

It is vulnerable to admit that something you're doing can be so powerful, so transformative!

Yeah. And it starts for me just with the act of singing, which is something I do throughout my day and that has accompanied me my whole life. Singing is my primary comfort and my primary feeling of home. And it's also been a

community builder for me throughout my life, and it's brought me into love relationships and friendships. Music has been the thing that has brought almost every experience of meaning for me. It's a pretty strong gravity.

That's so evident in the way that you talk about music. Given your deep and personal connection to the music that you create, how do you hold what is sacred in that for you close while also sharing it with others? How to protect what needs to be protected and while also sharing?

Oh, it's such a good question and I'm still figuring it out. There have been times where I know that I've shared too much, and then I need to hide for two weeks, but that hasn't happened in a while. I know my boundaries a bit better now. I do have one physical space that I don't share with anybody, and it's amazing because I don't think I had discovered it yet when you lived at the house. There was this old side entrance to the house that had been closed and locked up and through a renovation, there was a little window on it, and I couldn't quite see what was in there and I thought, someday I have to get a locksmith and open that door and see what's in there. Then, finally I did it, and it was this tiny room, maybe three feet wide and six feet long. Really small but definitely big enough for a small desk. And there's a little window on the door and one chair, there was room for that. I very promptly fixed it up and turned it into a meditation space that only I go into, no one else is allowed in there. There's something about having that physical space that I know no one else can go into, it's this privacy, it's a space where I can go to meditate or to think my most private thoughts. That has felt like a very important protective force field of my interior life.

Do you enjoy performing your music in front of people, is connecting with an audience something that is important to you?

I craved it more when I was younger, but not so much anymore. It's the kind of thing that's pretty hard for me to gear up to do if I haven't done it in a while. But then when I'm there, I feel it's wonderful to connect in this way. I love being in the cave and just exploring creatively and I think I always preferred this part of the life cycle of making an album or creating music in the studio, coming up with ideas and songs. And then everything that happens after that, the recording of the music, the making of the album art, finding ways to put out the music, and then to tour the music, that's all labor in service to this initial spark that I found in the studio. Those parts always felt more like labor to me, but something that felt worthwhile to do a service to this thing that I had excavated that I really wanted to share. But the fact that I have this motherhood, an excuse to stay in the cave for a little while, what a treat.

As you get back into your practice and set up your studio, move into a new chapter, what does seeking support from your creative community look like?

I think community feels fragmented for me in some ways and some of that was returning to LA after being in Toronto for eight and a half years, where that felt like a very solid community, that we were all part of one organism within that community. LA feels like many, many organisms and I had imagined that in time, there would be something comparable to what I had experienced in Toronto, and there is not. I have many wonderful friends and artists that I know and am in contact with but it's different. The figurative forest is super different here, every tree is different. But I've found, without even seeking it, that there have been these little pockets of community. There's been a new friend who has had people over to their backyard under this beautiful, giant old growth avocado tree. They had this question, who is the mother of Abraham, biblical Abraham, why don't we know her name? This is the mother of three of the major religions in the world, what's the deal? Why is she in secrecy? And so they've gone on this odyssey to find Abraham's mother, and so they've gathered people under this tree to talk about this. Why has this gone undercover? And to try and sing Abraham's mother's name, and it's this very experimental coven.

That sounds like such a special way to gather.

I know, it's pretty wild. And so that's become a form of community in that it's a group of people that see each other regularly with a shared intention. And then yeah, I think the babies are also bringing some of that sense of community into my life, which is so nice.

Do you have any parting words of wisdom?

I know we all know this, but it's pretty easy to forget right now how big of a thing we all just lived through together. And everyone's just running to get back to something that's gone and I'm finding myself just aghast how quickly we're all trying to return to something that I really feel is gone. It's transformed, it's turned into something else. So I want us all to be patient with each other and really, really gentle and helpful to each other right now, because it's confusing, it's disorienting.

I'm glad that you had so many questions about community and support and healing and holding all of these things in the balance, because it's no joke. Motherhood is no joke, a creative life is no joke, anything where you are asking of yourself to continually change and transform and be in dialogue with the process of transformation, and to be in the process of listening to what's happening around you while you're broadcasting and outputting. And that's a really tall order and it's getting taller I think. The more we can do that in community, and the more we can be present for each other's moments of broadcast and moments of listening, the better off we'll be.

Daniela Gesundheit Recommends:

Apply raw honey as a softening face mask

Listen to [Lena Platonos](#) and [Joanna Brouk](#)

Read [Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals](#) by Alexis Pauline Gumbs and "1383" by Emily Dickinson

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Name

Daniela Gesundheit

Vocation

vocalist, composer, poet, and cantor

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