

On empathy as the seed for creativity



Musician Willow Smith discusses staying true to yourself, the magic of the everyday, and the importance of curiosity and devotion in your process.

January 2, 2025 -

As told to Yang Shi, 2675 words.

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

What kind of energy has been coming your way recently?

Man, life has been really insane.

In a good way?

The world is in an interesting transformational period right now. We're all just trying to figure out how to be with reality on reality's terms. And yeah, there are so many blessings. There's so much good stuff happening. Just keeping on the path of being a human is difficult. I think we all feel that.

I'm with you. I've been questioning my place in a world that's changing so fast and wondering how I can help. Speaking of our collective experience, I wanted to talk about your last album, *Empathogen*. The title itself is inspired by molecules found in indigenous plants known for their unique ability to foster empathy. So, how does empathy shape both Willow, the artist, and Willow, the person?

For Willow, the artist, empathy is the vehicle. The vehicle where all amazing art gets done. That place of looking at the world, feeling deeply, and creating. Empathy is the seed of any really good artistic endeavor. It shapes how we live in the world, how we speak, how we move—that's rare and powerful medicine. Empathy is everything to me in both worlds.

On the same album, you delve into love—for others and yourself. In a Zane Lowe interview, you called self-love "one of life's biggest lessons." Where are you now on that journey?

I'm going to be on that journey forever, I feel. But right now, the universe has set up some challenges for me. I tell myself "Okay, this is your next level of learning how to love yourself and how to live authentically without fear." I'm navigating these challenges and it feels really good.

Can you expand on your current stage of learning?

I'm becoming the musician that I want to be. Musicians and artists that I look up to are starting to see me in a different way. This is challenging my perceptions of myself, my self-deprecating thoughts and my insecurities. It's like, "Oh no, it's time to update my perception of myself. It's time to open up and really start to see myself for what I am and not try to downplay myself." Being humble is really important, and we need that, but being too humble means putting yourself in a lower place. True humility is knowing exactly who you are—no more

and no less. In the past, I sidelined myself; now, I am walking in my power.

I love that.

Walk in your power.

That's so important. Like you said, it's tough to keep reminding yourself—especially when setbacks hit. It affects your self-worth. It's really hard to remind yourself to be strong and not let the imposter syndrome eat you up, so you can live your authentic self.

Yes!

So going off that, I know one of your songs is called "False Self." I love that song—it's all about finding your voice and staying authentic. But playing devil's advocate here—do you think the False Self is always negative, or could it have a constructive role?

In "False Self," I'm reflecting on my ego, and I'm starting to see it differently. The ego isn't evil—it's just trying to protect you. Sometimes, though, the way it does is unhealthy. But think about an animal backed into a corner—it fights back. That's just nature. I don't believe the ego is all bad. It can actually be used constructively. In the past, I thought the ego had to be completely eradicated, but now I realize it's more about healing it so the ways it protects you aren't toxic. You know what I mean?

Definitely. And how do you feel this plays a role in creativity?

It's crazy. Me and myself, me and my ego are having insane conversations and confrontations with one another. That's where a lot of my inspiration comes from. The struggles that I have in my mind are really a huge inspiration for all of my art.

When you get stuck, how do you deal with those creative blocks?

When you're creatively stuck, there's something else that's stuck. There's something else that's stagnant that needs to start moving so that your creativity can flow again. Maybe you're holding it in an emotion. Maybe you need to have a conversation that you haven't had and you're putting it off. Whatever it is, your creative energy gets affected by other things in your life. Your creative energy is your life force.

It's true. I relate to what you say about creativity as a life force. It's something you need to protect and cherish. It's precious.

Yes.

When bad energy affects you, it can leave you feeling vulnerable. Sometimes, you just need to let it out and process it, rather than resisting it.

Exactly. Instead of resisting that discomfort we're all trying to get away from.

Talking about music because music is your life force. What's the best music for you? Is it about the sound, the story, and how it moves people? Is it timeless and universal?

Oh, wow. Oh, man. I think people have a different perception of what good music is. For me, the best music is timeless and extremely personal. Something that I love about Joni Mitchell is her storytelling. She paints a picture. It's almost like you're not even listening to what she's saying, you're in the picture of what she's saying. You're seeing the planes in the sky, you're seeing the desert that she's talking about. You're feeling the wind. Her lyrics bring you into the story.

It's like a movie.

Yes. It's like a freaking movie.

So would you say good music is cinema?

It needs to... Yeah. it needs to have a strong enough energy to transport you into its world.

Is there a song that has this effect on you?

Oh, yeah. It's a Joni Mitchell song. It's actually off *Hejira* and it's called "Coyote."

I love that cinematic effect in music. It's not just about hearing—it should engage all your senses. You should feel it with your eyes, your touch, and even imagine smelling the melodies. As you said, a full 360 experience.

Yeah, exactly. It's immersive

So talking about songs you love, music spans generations and cultures carrying the echoes of those who came before us. So there's this lineage that's inherently very melodic, very in us. How do you see yourself within this lineage of jazz, funk and pop musicians, who have inspired you?

That used to cause me a lot of pain. I didn't see myself in that lineage. I used to feel I wasn't worthy. But now I see that, whether I make music or not, whether I'm a musician or not, I am still a part of this lineage because I'm an African-American woman, first and foremost. And that alone holds so much purpose. Every choice I make and everything I do, whether I like it or not, is part of that lineage. The fact that I've reached this point in my musical life and my relationship with my instrument, where I feel deeply connected to my ancestors through my devotion to music, is profound. And that connection isn't just about jazz or funk—it's about a human lineage that predates culture as we know it today. It's about those moments when we sat around the fire, sang, and played the bones of our ancestors.

That's beautiful.

And so yeah, it goes beyond the music for me at that point. It's deep medicine, calling on your ancestors and connecting to your ancestors.

Are there any musicians that have inspired you in your creative lineage?

Oh man. I don't know why Björk is really coming to mind right now.

Björk is great! She's out of this world.

Björk is so tapped into that human lineage, and you can tell with just the art that she creates, you can tell just how deeply connected to the earth and even she's connected to the star people. I'm like, "Okay, this is a whole thing." Björk, Ella Fitzgerald. Man, another one, let me give you another one. Brittany Howard.

Okay, yeah, Björk is incredible. I get what you mean about her transcending music. I saw her perform at Bluesfest many years ago without knowing much about her work. She had this massive cage filled with lightning bolts, and dancers, and it was right at sunset by the river. It felt magical—so grand and beautiful, it moved me. I didn't know her songs or much about her, but her deep connection to the audience was undeniable.

That's the real deal. Any good artist's art transcends the art form. That's why it's so next level because you don't need to know Björk songs to walk up to the show and be like, "Wow. I'm changed forever."

It's true. There's the before and after Björk experience. Talking about this spirituality and magic, when I'm looking at your brand and your social media there's something magical and very spiritual, do you believe in magic?

Oh my goodness, yes. I believe in magic. I studied physics for four years. It made me believe in magic. It's wild how some scientists resist the idea that the world is beyond our understanding. The more I study science, the more I'm in awe of its complexity—it's pure magic. Many great scientists feel the same, just like great artists. It all blends together. That's why mad scientists often look like artists—just look at pictures of Einstein or others like him.

Accurate. If you think of the theory of relativity, it's magical.

Bro. Yes.

Gravity is magical.

Yeah. We're on a planet going thousands of miles per hour around a burning ball of fire. What the heck? Are you kidding me?

And also, I guess the people we meet and the people we move, it's all magical.

Yes.

Have you had a magical moment or experience recently?

Recently, I've been waking up with the sunrise. That's not usually my thing, but it's just been happening. I'll open my eyes, and there's a window right next to my bed. The sun is peeking out from behind the mountain, and I'm just like, 'Damn. What a beautiful view.' You can't make this stuff up. I've also been noticing something else. You know that moment when you feel triggered? Like, something happens or someone says something, and you get that little flinch of, 'Oh shit, now I'm triggered.' Well, I've been focusing on the opposite of that. It's called glimmers—those moments where something happens, and you're like, 'Oh shit. Magic. I see it.'

I can see that.

I've been trying to remind myself every time it happens to say, "That's a glimmer. That's a glimmer. That's a glimmer." Because when we're triggered, we feel it—it hits hard. So why not feel those little glimmers just as deeply? Like, "Oh man, magic does exist."

I love that—I never thought of it that way. I never considered there could be an opposite of a trigger, like a positive trigger. Triggers are so powerful, and the more you're triggered, the more susceptible you become. I'd assume glimmers work the same way—the more you experience them, the more you notice them. I'm going to practice the observation of glimmers.

Yes!

In interviews, you often mention noticing the little things around you—your curiosity and eagerness to learn stand out. How do they shape your artistry and influence your music?

Empathy and curiosity are the best fertile soil for some good shit to happen. I feel if you're not curious, you're not going to be obsessed with an instrument. Because being obsessed with an instrument or being obsessed with a craft requires you to be curious. It requires you to be like, "Oh, how does this work? How does this sound?" To explore your artistic world as much as possible, you've got to be curious. It's fundamental.

It's true. And talking about being curious and being obsessed with art and crafts. Ella Fitzgerald, one of your favorite artists once said, "The only thing better than singing is more singing." How does this resonate with you? And how do you balance that between discipline and just the pure bliss of creating?

You can only reach pure bliss through discipline. That's something I've come to realize. My relationship with music was tumultuous for a long time because I hadn't fully discovered my way of expressing commitment and devotion. Now that I've found it—this is exactly how I express my dedication—I'm no longer confused. The real gifts of music are finally revealing themselves. I didn't think I could love music more after 15 years, but the deeper my devotion, commitment, and discipline grow, the deeper the joy and bliss become. I think that's just how it's designed. The same applies to relationships—the more present and committed we are to loving and honest connections, the deeper the experience becomes.

This is how I feel about my connection to craft. It's all just a labor of love.

The deeper our love can really become, the deeper the love can grow, and the deeper the gifts are.

That's true. I find it so hard nowadays. We're so distracted by social media in a world that's always on fire. It's difficult to create a space of intention for creativity. How do you make that space for yourself?

Oh man, you ask some really good questions. This place of intention is so important.

It's sacred.

It's sacred. I'm so glad you said that. Have you ever been to a meditation retreat or a ceremonial space where gratitude and devotion are central? Those spaces, so intentional, amplify the energy of gratitude. I'm lucky to know people who've dedicated their lives to creating such spaces. Spending time with them, and learning from their ceremonies, words, and way of living, has been invaluable. I'm still learning—it's a deep skill to create spaces of intention.

It's magic.

Yes. Just like you were saying before. I'm a baby magician, I'm not a full...

Wizard.

[laughs] I'm not a full wizard yet, but we learn and we practice.

That's the way to go! I have one last question for you. I mentioned before I'm also on a journey of self-discovery—as a creative, as a woman of color, navigating this tumultuous world. So, at the end of the day, Willow Smith, what do you want your legacy to be?

Oh my God. Man, I just love you. I love talking to you. You're a cool person.

Haha, same!

I know. I'm like, "Let's just hang out." What do I want my legacy to be? I want my legacy to be a legacy of care and devotion. It doesn't necessarily have to be tied to music even though that's my specific way of injecting care and devotion into the world. I want to inspire people to love each other intensely and with deep presence.

It's almost utopian, like a hippie dream.

Yeah. I hate to say it, but I'm a total hippie.

Me too. It's a safe space on a global scale.

Yeah! A safe space, but on a global scale. Imagine this: a space of intention everywhere—that magic of everyone being tuned in. Not just holding it individually, but truly holding it together.

And pursuing this lineage of love, care and music.

Pursuing the lineage of love and care. Yes. I love that.

Thank you for your authenticity and honesty. You've inspired me as a creative person to stay true to myself and create for the sake of art and love.

Yes. Everything is really simple, we make it complicated.

Yang Shi's favorite Willow Smith songs:

"symptom of life"

"false self"

"T r a n s p a r e n t s o u l (featuring travis barker)"

"pain for fun (featuring st. vincent)"

"alone"

Name

Willow Smith

Vocation

musician, actress, author

□