

# On finding value in discomfort



Painter, runner, and former triathlete Vanessa Raw discusses internal versus external drive, the cost of people-pleasing, and acting from a place of power instead of fear.

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As told to Laura Zeng, 3487 words.

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## **How long have you been running vs. painting?**

I've always been sporty and arty. I went to uni to do fine art, but picked up triathlon at lunch times to keep fit. Then it got very serious, very quick. Before I knew it, I was doing time trials to be on the GB team, and it took over for 12 years, and now I'm back painting.

## **Sounds like triathlon accidentally took over your life.**

I did kind of feel like I had to do it. When you're told you're good at something, you feel obliged.

## **Which Olympics did you go to?**

Well, I didn't in the end, you see. My best chance was 2008 and 2012. But I was injured before both. I was probably in my best shape in 2006, after only a year of training, before my body started breaking down.

## **Damn.**

Yeah, it was all a bit depressing. I was a very good cyclist, so they were trying to get me to be a domestique for this other girl. You still have a chance of winning your own medal, but you end up having to sacrifice a lot of your race sitting in the front of the peloton, basically, taking the wind. But because I was so injured at this point with my pelvis, I didn't trust myself anymore. So I just pulled out of the running.



Vanessa Raw, *Dancing With My Demons*, 2025, oil on linen, 300 cm x 361 cm.

**Do you look back on those 12 years you were committed to sport fondly? Or does it feel like ambition took over?**

Yes and no. Yes to the people that helped me and my teammates and the amazing places that we trained and raced in. But to be honest, it was a trying time. I hope it wasn't for nothing. Did it teach me persistence?... maybe, but I think I had that anyway. It taught me how to withstand pain and uncertainty and find endurance, I guess. I guess it taught me all that-and endurance is certainly required in the art world.

**Do you feel like it fed your art?**

I think it's helped me become embodied whilst making work. But yeah I also went to some dark places, and it's what got me onto the subject of identity. A lot of sports people go into deep holes of depression when they're injured, because you forget to separate yourself from what you do. It's a hard lesson to learn, but it's why the exploration of "losing oneself" in my art is fascinating to me.

**It sounds like painting is freeing because you don't have to think.**

Well, I am thinking, but I've had to transition into it. It's only over the last couple of years that I've gotten much better at painting from a more freeing point of view. I think I'm also just getting better at letting things

go. I'm still not as loose as I would like to be, but you have to let things happen naturally: the very act of forcing yourself to be loose brings you right back to the beginning, out of flow.

That happened to me in sport: as soon as one injury took hold, it just led to another and another, and I don't think I ever stood on a start line again after the first few years without an injury. I lost trust in my body. And maybe intuition is felt through the body first. But to have intuition you need presence, and for that, you need trust. The best sports people don't overthink. They trust themselves. So maybe it was just my body, soul and intuition all along screaming at me, "You're on the wrong path. Stop!" Hahah. Perhaps I should have just listened to that.

**So painting is the path?**

Well painting is less precarious. Anyways, I hope so! Who knows? I mean, my arm won't break mid-painting, as compared to the limitations of the body in sport. Having said that, I take my painting to the total extreme, and that's something I love about it. I'm addicted to the obsession of it. Last year I felt like I was on the brink of burnout, but I'm trying to be more balanced this year. I think I do my best work when I feel trust and excitement and joy.

**I often think the perfectionism of sport makes it hard to be an artist.**

I know what you mean. I think it's funny because I guess in some way I have the mentality of being an athlete when I'm an artist, and vice versa when I was an athlete. People around here would say that, because I'm in the studio every day and extremely disciplined. But my head is so unstructured. I was recently diagnosed with ADHD, which accounts for all the overthinking and feeling overwhelmed, but I'm learning to manage it so it becomes my superpower rather than a hindrance. Structure really helps.



Vanessa Raw, *She Hid in the Shadows*, 2025, oil on linen, 200 cm x 300 cm.

As an athlete, I was really good at training. The daily grind. Honestly, if they gave medals out for training, I would be getting them all haha. But I was shit at the racing, I think, because I had major self-doubt. I carried way too much guilt all the time. I always had this time pressure on myself too that I needed to do well quickly so I could get out of the sport so I could spend more time with friends or family. I like to have a different way of thinking these days, though, that everything happened just the way it was meant to, it was the journey that led me here, where I am right now, and that I am grateful for.

**Was the guilt about letting people down, or wasting time ?**

I had this guilt of not doing my art. People see the nice side of sport, don't they? And how amazing it must be. In their perspective, I've done well. They don't see the pain and disappointment. It was constant, and there was so much guilt for not doing well enough. Letting down coaches who put time into you or managers or sponsors or... I mean, I guess it's when the people-pleasing side of things comes fully onto it, doesn't it? You've got to not be a people-pleaser to be a good athlete, I think.

**That's interesting to think of as a prerequisite.**

Yeah, because I don't think people-pleasing is ever good. Maybe a small amount is ok. I just think you can do nice things for people because you want to, and not because you are scared of being disliked.

**I struggle with knowing if I'm doing things for the right reasons.**

I mean, I definitely feel much more in tune with the person I should be in doing my art. I feel like I want to paint for the rest of my life, that this is what I have to do and what I need to do. I feel like this is my mission in life, whereas I never did with sport. It's certainly not for fame or external validation. Although annoyingly for art, external validation is necessary to keep going financially!

**Yeah. I'm still on the journey to figure that out.**

I think actually as soon as you stop questioning whether you're happy, and you just be, like in the present as much as possible, you're much more likely to find peace and realize you're happier than you think. I think I went through a phase of asking, "Oh, am I happy? Or am I this? Am I doing the right..." And I don't think that's what happiness is. Happiness is just being.



Vanessa Raw, *The Madness in Our Eyes*, 2025, oil on linen, 200 x 300 cm.

**Do you feel like it's a mentality you could have or wish you had reached when you were an athlete? Or do you feel like it's a sort of state of mind and being you could only reach now?**

I don't know. Maybe it only comes with struggle.

**Where does intuition sit for you?**

I don't think any of it is separate. I think we're everything. Where are memories kept? Maybe intuition is the soul, maybe it's consciousness... We just don't know, do we? But yeah, this is what my work's about, I guess, in being one with everything and totally connected, and women becoming the landscape itself. I think it's when you suddenly feel at peace, let's say totally in the moment, which is hard, that you feel like the boundaries of your own existence just dissolve. You become part of the landscape.

**Is the flow you find in painting similar to running?**

I think it's similar. I prefer to start the day with a run, because it sets a rhythm to the day, and I love to paint to that rhythm. When I don't have a rhythm in the painting, I feel like it shows. It doesn't work somehow. I believe there's a rhythm to everything, invisible frequencies. I used to have that a few times with professional sport, but more so in training than in racing. When you're totally free of thought, there's this realization that if you're not your thoughts, and you're just observing them, then what are you? Flow is just when you can get outside of your own brain to sense what you're connected to, I think.

**Do you feel your desire and discipline are aligned now?**

I think they are. And maybe that's the difference now. In sports, it wasn't. I think they were kind of opposed to each other, which is where the guilt came from. Now, discipline doesn't feel like discipline. It's just what I want to do.

**How do you think about desire?**

I mean, at the minute, this is what I want to do. And I have such... It's not necessarily discipline, but I have such passion and drive. I can't sleep at night because I can't wait to get up in the morning and do what I want to do. It feels like a mission. Is it discipline? Yes, but it's more than that. It's massive fire and obsession. And sometimes, I know I was saying this to Carl, my gallerist, he was thinking it was because I've come to it a little bit later, or feel like I wasn't doing what I shouldn't have been doing for 10 years that I feel like it's like, "Oh, time's going to run out and I've got to get painting, I've got to make up for a lost time." That sort of idea.

I've got so much I want to explore and try and practice before I can make the work I want to make; it's always around that corner. I'm constantly trying to chase my tail in terms of trying things, yet you have these deadlines where your work's going to be shown, and I'm trying to paint as quickly as I can to learn everything I should have been learning in the 10 years before this. I've really got to slow down, be present and remember as Tracey taught us, that you are making the art you should be making right now. The pure act of constantly chasing and looking to the future pulls you away from presence. It implies you aren't making the work we should be right now. At the minute, this is my desire and my discipline. But there might be a point in my life where I suppose that desire might change.

**I feel like happiness is a misnomer. People think it's some permanent, enduring state when really... It's more like knowing what emotional landscape you want to live in, because some people's happiness might be a desert and some people's might be the ocean. There's a different type of average feeling, and it's like just finding what feels true to you.**

There was this video where someone asked a monk, "Are you happy?" And he said, "I can't answer that." He says, "I'm at peace. What is happiness?" He just couldn't describe it. He says he knows he's at peace, and that is the ultimate for him.



Vanessa Raw, *Take Me to the Ocean, Cleanse My Soul*, 2025, oil on linen, 212 cm x 408 cm.

**What does peace mean to you?**

We can be peaceful whilst being driven. I don't think peace means you don't do anything. I think it's just not feeling this constant state of unease, of not living in the future or past.

**It's so crazy you use that word, because one time I interviewed this monk, and he was saying that that in the 21st century, the word "dukka," which means suffering, needs to be re-translated to "unease."**

I'm a big believer in not being comfortable. I think comfort is a big killer. And I love...And you're probably like this as a sportsperson, but going out and pushing myself and inflicting pain. What's the challenge? What can I sustain? How much pain can I take? I love it but also hate it, haha. I just think it's good for us. I think it kind of creates this strength within us. And I wonder if we can't find peace in pain. I think that's what the monk was suggesting: that pain doesn't have to equal suffering.

I noticed a big difference when I was working towards this last deadline, because it was a lot of work. I went through periods of panic and not being at ease, not being able to sleep, constantly in the studio, constantly worrying about the deadline.

When I worried about the deadline, time would just go by and I would get barely anything done in the day. But when I became present, practicing breathing whilst painting, or attempting to be present whilst painting, time would just slow down. It literally became elastic. It was fascinating, the difference. And I would get so much more done. The only reason why I am so fascinated in this subject I think is because I am an inherently anxious over-thinker. But perhaps suffering or unease breeds ease. If we were always comfortable I guess we wouldn't look for relief.

**Time is weird.**

Well, I mean, time apparently doesn't exist. Well, clock time does, but I think it's the case of not making clock time psychological time.

**How do you escape time?**

Well, I guess the whole time being an artist, you're constantly thinking, "Oh, well, if you haven't made it, been spotted in your 20s, it's either that or 80." But if we panic about time, we end up losing time. And there is no supposed timeline for us, really. But yeah, perhaps its that inbuilt biological clock, even if we don't plan to have kids, some social conditioning that we need to do things at a certain time or we're on the shelf so to speak.

I guess we need an internal drive, not an external one. You're trying to find it internally so it comes from a place of power rather than a place of fear. I think that's a big thing, because if you feel like you are running from a lion, then I don't think you do your best work. And then if you come from a place of being in control and you work from power and confidence, then life just flows, and everything comes to you anyway. I'm a big believer in that. And I feel like, in the now, I can feel that happening. When thinking about the future or past, and anxiety kicks in.

**How do you shift out of a fear state?**

Literal things that bring you back to the moment. Your mentality, your psychological mind, can be changed immediately if you want it. I definitely think having a sense of belief in something greater than us, and perhaps holding the thought that our world is a mirror of our inner world, gives me the motivation to keep checking myself.

**I guess it's real because you have the power of the brush, so you literally are manifesting your own worlds every day.**

Yeah, exactly. Every day, it's practiced haha.

**That's so nice though, the feeling that you must have of alignment.**

Yeah, I mean, by any means I'm not the majority of the time. But the frustration of not being aligned motivates me quickly to get out of it. I think when you've reached rock bottom before, it's enough to set you on a path of looking for alignment and becoming aware of your interiority. I do think maybe that's what sport was about. When things always went wrong in sport, I learned a lot about myself. Not when things went right or well, but when things went wrong.

**Did you paint while you were training?**

I did, but not consistently. There were maybe a couple years where I had no studio, but also I was not painting with the same amount of intensity that I am now. I was painting largely crap. A lot of the time painting to survive, painting God knows what. When I first went to uni, I was painting meaningful stuff. I was painting about the male gaze and what it felt like to be a woman, but I think because I had all male tutors, it got encouraged out of me. And then for the rest of uni, I was painting landscapes, but not good ones, and then some portraits. It wasn't for no reason-the attitude back then was that what you painted was not important, it mattered more how you painted. The technique in the act of transferring emotion and energy, the "surface." For the next fifteen years I pretty much explored every way of painting and vehicle for what I was trying to say until eventually, when I started this work about five years ago, I finally felt like I was on the right path. A sense of ease doesn't mean that that path won't evolve and change, but I felt like my work finally reflected how I was feeling.



Vanessa Raw, *The Secrets That We Keep*, 2025, oil on linen, 200 cm x 250 cm.

**And are you still doing the process? I think I read somewhere that when you go on your runs, you take photos and then infuse that into your work. Or is your process more abstract?**

Yeah. I kind of do, but the landscapes now are much more imagined and psychological, though still mixed with parts of real landscape perhaps.

**I love that. I like that as an artist you can evolve. It's not all linear progress.**

Yeah. Hopefully for the rest of my life. But constantly wanting to be better isn't coming from a place of lack of mental health. I think some people think life is black and white, that happy people have no mental health problems and unhappy people have all the mental health problems. But just because I'm saying I'm happy or at least not unhappy, doesn't mean I'm free of any mental health problems, that I'm free of anxiety or sleep perfectly every night. I just don't think there's just two boxes of happy and unhappy, and everyone in the happy box is perfectly mentally healthy. A natural drive to keep improving is healthy. It's about the work and getting it as good as it can be at the time, and then moving on. That's what keeps me going—this continual curious search.

**Vanessa Raw recommends:**

Good quality paint, Michael Hardings in particular. Have just discovered The [Supremepaint.co.uk](https://www.supremepaint.co.uk), which is an amazing site for paint nerds, that sells Wallace Seymour paint, brilliant colours from rare earth materials.

Good-quality brushes, Rosemary&Co Brushes are my fave.

A morning routine, that may just be, not turning on the phone immediately, but reading two chapters of a book. When I do stick to this, my whole day goes better, less reactive, more productive.

Books by Martin Gayford, he does a lot of readable books with artists that I'm loving at the moment.

When it's hard to get in the mood in the studio, turn your favourite music up loud, close your eyes, feel the rhythm, and move/dance. I find it's like a meditation, can be enough to get back in the flow, or if that fails, get outside and walk/run

Name

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Vocation

painter, runner, tri-athlete

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