On taking yourself seriously



Writer Alicia Kennedy on embracing negativity, the perils of a public persona, refusing to please your audience, and the necessity of enjoying one's own life.

November 1, 2021 -

As told to Isabel Slone, 1601 words.

Tags: Writing, Success, Mental health, Time management, Beginnings, Inspiration.

You're one of the more visible writers to make a living from writing a subscription-based newsletter. What is that like?

I started the newsletter because I just needed a place to publish my work consistently. At the beginning of the pandemic, both the contributing editor and contributing writer jobs that I relied on as consistent income were cut. By May 2020, I had lost 80% of my regular income. I started the newsletter thinking it would be a way to grow my audience and get more jobs from other places, not necessarily become the bulk of my work. But I had already decided not to write for food magazines anymore. I write about food from a cultural and political perspective and when I started off I was being very agitating to mainstream food media.

I used the newsletter to put my voice out there in a way that I had never been allowed to do before and it worked out. It remains weird because a lot of the people who are super successful on Substack built their audience somewhere else but mine has emerged organically in the past year. Suddenly lots of people are paying attention, which is really strange.

What's behind the agitating impulse you mentioned?

My Mercury in Saggitarius? I started my career in media as a copy editor at New York Magazine. When you're in a research role in a magazine, you are treated really poorly, you're paid less than everybody else, and no one treats you like you're very smart. I think I had a lot of pent up rage about that.

When I started writing more, I felt really constrained by the tone of food media. I really found my voice when the Popeye's chicken sandwich thing happened. Everyone was obsessed with this sandwich but no one was asking any questions about where the chicken came from, how the workers were treated, the chicken's impact on the environment. That was my moment of just exploding.

I realized I could no longer write in this tone where I don't take everything seriously. How things taste, how we cook them and the joy we take in that is so important, but that can't be the only thing we talk about. I want to connect that joy to the larger political and economic issues that govern our food system. What would our food look like if we had universal basic income and nationalized healthcare? What would service in the restaurant industry look like if we didn't really just coerce people into wage labor? I wanted to create a space where I ask and explore those questions. Obviously writing an essay every week doesn't lend itself to deep reporting, but I'm writing a book, so that's where the depth is going.

What is your relationship like to your 'fan base?'

It’s been strange to have to deal with the assumptions people make about me. As a writer, of course you want people to read your work, you want people to pay attention. But then when it happens, it’s never just about your work. It’s really strange to think that people are making up their own version of me in their heads. I’ve put a lot of restrictions on my notifications. People can’t DM me on Instagram unless I follow them. I don’t see notifications on Twitter or from anyone I don’t follow. I have to really protect myself. I don’t want to be in a vacuum and not see any criticism, but at the same time, people often don’t give criticism in a way that is useful or constructive. The other day someone made a Twitter account just to tell me I’m a bitch. There’s no good faith. I interviewed Emily Gould for my newsletter and she told me that you do have to create a bubble for yourself online or people will just drive you nuts.

That reminds me of a quote I read in the New York Times recently, Lucy Dacus said, “I honestly don’t wish notoriety on anybody.”

Especially when you’re a woman. There’s a double-edged sword that comes with having attention on your work, because so much of the attention is never about your work. Getting attention by virtue of doing your work isn’t the same thing, as begging for attention. I don’t care if someone wants to be an influencer, that’s not my business. But the assumption that any woman who gets attention for her work is asking for it and should just be happy and shut up is a really odd angle to take. It’s like an acceptable form of misogyny.

Has making an income off your creativity changed your relationship to creating? E.g. do you want to write more or less now that there’s a financial imperative to do so?

I have tons to say. It’s really easy for me to write in first person. I like to read. I like to watch things. I like to talk to people while sitting at a bar. All these things feed into what I write. With the newsletter, I’m really not trying to create a grand work of literature. I’m trying to chronicle my thoughts over time as they evolve around certain topics. It’s high stakes, because my financial life is dependent upon this newsletter, but it’s not high stakes in terms of my creativity. The newsletter has been successful on the basis of me following my whims. I don’t have the kind of imperative to please people or please my audience in a way that is assumed it’s part of the job. I just follow my muse — to use a total cliche — and it seems to work. I don’t feel alienated from my labor at all.

What do you feel is a popular misconception around your work that you’d like to correct?

I guess that I’m really negative? But we exist in the context of a global food system that has a very negative impact on the environment, on labor, and that is something that needs to be discussed. When I wrote about peanut butter and suggested that if you have the means and ability you should buy natural peanut butter without palm oil, because its a questionable resource that leads to deforestation in the Global South, someone responded to me, “I find your moral certitude off putting.” But I’m just trying to remind people that the ubiquity and cheapness of industrial meat and dairy is something that has been constructed by government subsidies and taxpayer money. I’m always trying to reframe how people think of these things.

It’s interesting to me that stating facts or providing a critical perspective on something that’s widely popular can be interpreted by some people as “negative.”

I’m certainly not a perfect human being. We live in an online world where everyone is presumed a saint until proven otherwise and that’s a very dangerous way of thinking about things. I have my own bad consumer tendencies — everyone does. But we should all be interrogating these behaviours and challenging them ourselves.

Do you stick to a daily schedule/routine? If so, how helpful is that in terms of cultivating creativity?

Keeping a regular schedule is really useful for me, especially since I’m not beholden to any sort of job. My fiancé works 9-5 in an office, so my life is basically structured around that. I sit at my desk at 9:00am and start with administrative tasks and figure out what’s going on. Then I write until lunch, take a break, and come back to work afterwards. Ideally, I spend the afternoon reading, not writing, because I don’t think as well in the afternoon. I try to maintain Monday and Tuesday for newsletter stuff and Wednesday through Friday for book

stuff. When I get off schedule it’s really hard to come back from and I’m very conscious of that.

How has your relationship with the concept of success changed over time?

It’s one of those things where the goalposts are always shifting. If you told me two years ago what my life would be right now, I would have been like, “That’s amazing.” But when you’re in it and you have to work all the time, it still feels like a grind. I have a note above my desk that says, “Your life will be so good when this book is done.” It’s a mantra for me to remind myself that once I finish the book, I will be free again. Of course I wanted to write a book, but I didn’t realize it would be the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my entire life. Which it should be! But going through the process, especially on top of everyday life, is very mentally and emotionally taxing. Hopefully it will feel like success to have my book out and sell it and have people enjoy it.

Are there tactics you use in order to avoid getting overwhelmed by the pressure?

I run every weekday morning, which I need to do in order to focus. I have a dog that I love very much. I see the ocean every day. I love to drink wine. I can’t complain.

Alicia Kennedy Recommends:

Reading Andreas Malm, especially *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*

Charring eggplants

Listening to the podcasts “Bookworm” or “Public Intellectual” while walking your dog

Watching *Carlos* the miniseries and *The Young Pope* on an annual basis

Splurging on spices

Name
Alicia Kennedy

Vocation
Writer