

On finding authenticity



Writer and editor Aiyana Ishmael on staying focused, the importance of practice, and being authentic.

December 23, 2024 -

As told to Sarah John, 2445 words.

Tags: Writing, Journalism, Beginnings, Process, Success, Inspiration, Independence.

Something I've always admired about you is your drive and your ambition. Can I ask what helps you stay focused on your goals?

For me personally, everything I do, I'm doing it because I love it—desperately, wholeheartedly love it. That is where that motivation comes from. I think a lot of people sometimes are chasing a career, a path, or a creative platform because they see everyone is doing it, not because they're actually interested in the good, the bad, and the ugly that comes with it.

I stay motivated because it's the only thing I love. I make time for it. I make time to learn and I make time to grow and to get better at this thing that I say I love so much.

For me, growing up as an athlete—having a dad who's a football coach, a mom who played collegiate volleyball—I always approach everything with a sports background, where like you either go to practice and get better or you don't and you stay the same. That's kind of how I approach my art, my writing, and my work. I can either do something today that puts me closer to my goals or it helps me get better and stronger as a writer, or I can do nothing and I can stay the same and that's my choice.

There are many days where I do nothing, because I don't feel like it. But for the most part I always approach it kind of with that almost black and white sports mentality.

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I think sometimes with creative work, there can be this illusion that, "Oh, it's all so subjective, so what's the point in working on it?"

A hundred percent.

But you're right, you can improve anything with practice.

Yeah. I tell everyone that when I was in college, I was editor-in-chief of our student magazine, and all these freshmen and sophomores came to me and said that they want to be a better writer. But there was this one girl, and she was the only one that actually showed up every day. By the end of that freshman year, her writing had grown exponentially, especially when you compare it to the other people that weren't showing up and writing articles.

It's hard, because it is creative. But there is something to say about someone that doesn't give up, and they keep fighting and pushing for it. Especially in the creative space, you will get better if you chase after it every day.

My next question is, where do you go to seek inspiration?

Honestly, I go outside. It sounds so silly, but I think people are quick to trap themselves in a room and think they need to get work done that way. You have to feel inspired. Living in New York City has also really changed my perspective, because it's such an interesting city. There's so many people that just when they walk past you, there's just this energy about them that makes you wonder what's their story and how did they get to where they are today.

I also love volunteering. Volunteering and meeting people of all ages from all backgrounds, it really has helped me just have more creativity. And I think the only way I can get inspired is just by seeing the world.

Obviously some people don't have the privilege to travel. But I think it's also just in your city. When I was in Tallahassee, that's also how I got a lot of my story ideas for my publication. I would go walk around because it's like you need to take in the world around you. It just reminds you that you're in this present moment and that there's so much to be explored.

I feel like you've had a slightly less traditional path to media, which I think can be viewed as kind of this archaic, super-elitist profession. So I'm curious, did you deal with any self-doubt early on in your career and how did you deal with that?

Yeah, I 100 percent dealt with self-doubt I think from the beginning. I always tell everyone I wasn't the strongest writer in high school. Everyone took AP [Advanced Placement] Lang and AP Lit. I took them as well. I remember my junior year of high school just feeling so demoralized because I was sitting in my AP Language course, and I was getting fours on our practice exams. I was in a class with some of my friends and some people I didn't know, who were literally getting the highest score. I can't remember if it was an eight or a nine. Whatever it was, they were getting eights to nines. I remember just feeling so down about myself and my writing.

Then I just remember this one moment has honestly stayed with me. It was the day before the AP Lang exam and our teacher was going around the room hyping everyone up individually. I was getting so anxious when she was coming to me, because obviously she had just gone by all the girlies that had gotten eights and nines all year long and said, "I'm not worried about y'all, y'all are going to do perfect." So when she was coming to me, I got so nervous. I remember she stopped and she looked at me and she said, "Aiyana." I was like, "Oh Lord, here it goes. She's going to tell me just do your best, sweetie."

But she looked me in my face and with all sincerity was like, "Some people are born with it and some people aren't." She was like, "You are born with it." She was like, "There's nothing else to it." I just remember taking that in so deeply, because I needed it.

I think it also stuck with me because it reminded me that I don't have to be the best in the room, but that there's a quality about me that is worth it. That really pushed me.

Then there were a lot of ups and downs obviously once I got to college. I didn't immediately go to university. I went to community college, so that obviously played a huge part in just me doubting my abilities because I felt like I was going to be behind. I honestly just had to remind myself, I'm Christian. I grew up very Christian, and just believing that God has me on a specific path has really been helpful for me personally.

I think even taking God out of it, it's just knowing that you have a specific journey, you have a specific path. Everything that has happened to me and everything that will happen is a part of my story. And so honestly, when I'm feeling down, I have to remind myself that my journey is mine only and everything that happens is for a reason.

What scares you at this point in your career and how do you manage that?

I think there is a constant fear that I'm always thinking about. It hasn't really happened yet, but it's the reason why I'm very mindful. I would never want any work I put out to not feel like, "Oh, this came from Aiyana."

How do you make sure that the work you put out feels like you?

I think on the nine to five side, just being more vocal. The biggest thing is just literally speaking up for myself, and actually not being afraid to push back on an edit, or a specific line that I really like and I feel like adds to the story.

I've now done that a couple times, fighting for just—even if it's just a sentence that I feel like needs to be in the story, for it to feel like an Aiyana story.

Then on the personal, it's really just not rushing the process. Now I'm in the journey of writing fiction and it's so easy to compare yourself, and to see other people getting book deals and to be in this weird space where I have agents reaching out to me, but they're specifically looking for something that I'm not working on. It's like it's so close, you can taste it. I want to rush the process, but I have to remind myself like "No, slow down. This is your passion project." I think I'm just trying to remind myself it'll come and I'm not going to push myself to finish it just to get it done. I want to make sure that it's done the way that Aiyana will do it.

I'm curious how you have learned to define success after meeting all these benchmarks, like Forbes 30 Under 30, and you have this job at *Teen Vogue*. So when did you decide, this is what success looks like to me?

I was just having this conversation in a meeting for a panel I'm about to do at our summit, and it was about what happens once you get all your dreams. Obviously I'm 26, I have so many more dreams to create and worlds to want to be involved in. But in a lot of ways, the things that I thought I would be doing at this age, I've done, even as simple as getting on the Forbes 30 Under 30. I was just like, "Oh, cool, that's crazy that that happened."

Then of course, *Teen Vogue* is the one place I've always said I wanted to work. So it's hard because it's like once you've gotten to this point, you're like, "Oh, well, what do I do now?" I think in the last year especially, I spent a lot of time sitting, reflecting, and wondering, "Okay, what do I want next?" "What do I want out of life separate from my job?"

For me personally, it's now looking at success holistically and wondering what a successful and healthy life looks like when I'm not solely Aiyana from *Teen Vogue*. I don't want that to always be who I am and define who I am, especially.

It's asking myself at the end of the day, if I am just me separate from my job, do I feel happy? Do I feel loved? Do I have community? Are the people in my life supporting me a hundred percent? Are the co-workers and the colleagues that I keep in my inner circle, are they speaking highly of me? Are they fighting for me in the rooms that I'm not in?

If I can't say yes to those kinds of questions, then I'm not successful and I'm not happy and I'm not where I need to be. I think as I've gotten older, it's become less about titles and awards and more about, am I a good person? Are the people around me good people? I want people that push back and remind me that there's so much work still to be done, not even just professionally, but just as people and as humans, that there's so much kindness to give to other people.

My last question is how do you deal with rejection?

I'm big on letting yourself feel what you feel. I'll never forget this. I was so dramatic. It was when I was in college. I had applied for *The New York Times*. They have this one-year fellowship that's usually for early career journalists, and it was something that I thought I really, really wanted.

I'll never forget, I made one grammatical error that wasn't that big. It was forgetting a comma or I think putting a comma where I didn't need one. While it was small, that's something they definitely check for. I remember I didn't notice it until after I'd already submitted my application, and I couldn't unsend the application and reapply again. I literally looked probably so insane to the people that were there.

I was in our Convergence J School area in the Journey Magazine office, but our offices are open, see-through glass windows. You can see through it basically. I remember sitting at the computer in that open space and I just freaked out. I started crying. There was a box of Journey Magazine keychains. I started throwing them at the walls and I was so mad. I was like, "How could you do this? I just was like, "How could you make this silly mistake, Aiyana?" I was so upset, started crying, freaking out.

I remember turning around and then seeing two people that were sitting in the middle of the Convergence, they kind of just were looking at me. And I was like, "Oh." It kind of brought me back into reality. I got in my car. I drove to this nature hike that they had. I literally parked there and I went for a walk, and I just let myself cry.

I walked for about an hour and I got back in my car and I said, "There's nothing you can do. If they really want you, they'll still hire you. They will get over this comma. If you don't get it, you don't get it." I'm big on letting yourself feel whatever the hell you feel in that moment. I think it's diminishing to try to say, you shouldn't feel sad, angry, disappointed about not getting something.

If you really wanted it and you were passionate about it, you will have emotions about not getting something. We're all human. You can't pretend or hide it. I think suppressing your emotions is worse in the long run. You'll just blow up months later. I think for me personally with rejection, you first have to feel whatever emotion you're feeling.

You just have to do what you have to do to feel what you feel, and then you make a plan, "Okay, am I going to reapply next year? Am I going to pivot and try something different?" That's exactly what I did. I didn't get *The New York Times*, but I got *Wall Street Journal* that summer, and so I spent the summer at the *Journal*. And then the first week at the *Journal*, the job at *Teen Vogue* opened up, and then I got the job at *Teen Vogue*. So I think it all works out for a reason.

Aiyana Ishmael recommends:

[TirTir Mask Fit Red Cushion Foundation](#)

[Neutrogena Hydrating Lip Sleeping Mask](#)

[Parable of the Sower](#) by Octavia Butler

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