

On the importance of experimentation



Journalist and editor Sarah Leonard discusses writing from a place of curiosity, allowing politics to motivate your work, and the importance of getting out of the house on a regular basis.

January 3, 2024 -

As told to Colleen Hamilton, 2254 words.

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To start, I'm curious if you approach your writing and editing processes in different ways? How do they inform each other?

Being an editor makes you a better writer, and vice versa. If you write a fair bit, you'll start to see the edits that good editors often make to your work. "I'm using too many words here. It's getting too flowery." I can see the cuts that an editor would make and I internalize those.'

At the same time, as a writer, I know how sensitive I am about my work. I'm not precious, I don't mind cuts, I don't think every word I write is poetry, but still, I'm very sensitive to the core question: "Does the person think I've done a good job?"

And so as an editor, I try to be extra sensitive to my writers. I think writing, for me, is usually about expressing a strong point of view. A lot of my writing is very directly political, and as an editor, I'm usually trying to tease out what the writer really thinks. I'm trying to get to the essential core of what they're trying to say. I really regard it as a dialogue between me and the writer. When I first receive a draft, I think of that as the beginning of a conversation. As a writer, it can be quite hard to know what your core point is. A good editor can help with that.

You mentioned a great deal of your writing is political. You've become known for these deep political pieces that get to the heart of a current event, such as the fall of Roe v. Wade last summer. A lot of people become overwhelmed by these events but they seem to motivate you. How do you get started and resist that overwhelm?

It really depends. When I was younger, I wrote a lot of very polemical pieces, like "You all think that liberal feminism is good, but actually, I'm here to tell you that class matters!" That's the enormous confidence of youth, which is not a bad thing. It just is.

Now I'm more likely to write out of curiosity. I'm trying to figure something out instead of writing out of sheer confidence that I uniquely know what the answer is. For example, in the next abortion strategy piece, I have long had a critique of the mainstream reproductive rights movement for being too narrowly focused on electoral work and lobbying.

I felt confident in having identified some of the things that were not working, but I wanted to understand what the actual answers were to that—which is very complicated. After that, I called the smartest people I could think

of, people who are immersed in the movement, who have enormous amount of experience, and asked them what they were doing, what they thought was coming next, what they would encourage other people to do. From there, I constructed a political argument about the shape of the movement that we could offer as a framework to our readers, "Here's how to think about what's going on, as well as what's useful and what isn't right now."

I also hoped that would translate into information that's accessible for people who are concerned about the problem and come in the door of the movement and think about what to do. Because I knew that if I didn't feel like the answers were obvious, other people probably didn't either. I think that work was meant to clarify things, almost for myself, and then to bridge into that thinking for our readers.

In addition to writing and editing, you also teach at NYU. How does teaching inform your writing and editing work?

I love working with students. I'm a big fan of them. I'm often struck by how open and thoughtful they are to questions that—on adult media internet—are addressed totally aggressively. I really respect them for that. I also learn a lot about how they're consuming media, which affects how I put out media. It all relates in this really compelling way.

Obviously NYC is incredibly expensive and independent media isn't the most lucrative path. How do you balance these many different roles?

I don't know, poorly. I like the joke that was circling around online for a while: "Break free from your tyrannical boss and work independently, so you can be your own tyrannical boss!"

I find it challenging to wake up and sort through which of 97 priorities I should be focusing on first. I have a lot of deranged looking ways for dealing with that. I literally have an Airtable that I use for my personal life. I mean, it's ridiculous. I have every task from every different type of work I do in the Airtable, tagged in different ways, with what date I'm going to do it, and what project it's for. Of course, I fall off of that list all the time, but it gives me a nice illusion of control. I have so much respect for everybody trying to make it work. It's just hard. I'm not romantic about it.

Speaking of it being hard, how do you avoid burnout and stay motivated to continue creating, especially when your work is about the highs and lows of political movements?

Often when I'm feeling the worst is when I am in some sort of work hole, in isolation. I'll be sitting in my apartment, or a little space at NYU, just trying to grind work out. That feels terrible. I personally am very motivated and restored by dialogue and spending time with actual human beings. *Lux* does not have an office right now, so we do a lot of communicating on Slack, which is great. But I find if I'm sitting around talking in person with a co-editor, or talking with a writer, we'll come up with new and interesting ideas. We'll solve problems. If I'm feeling unmotivated about the work, I try to call someone and speak.

When I was younger, if I felt behind in my work, I would deny myself leaving the house at the end of the day, and feel like I had to just keep working. What I've learned is that you should always, always leave the house. Go talk to people. It loosens everything up. It often makes it easier to work, it makes it easier to treat the work as experimental instead of needing to get it right, which closes down creative thought.

Also, frankly, you just need to take breaks. There have been times where I've thought, "If I don't take a break, my head is going to explode." I've found, if you take a vacation, it doesn't need to be a fancy vacation, but if I can authentically step away from your work for a few days, I will come back to it much, much better.

As you mentioned, much of your writing and editing at *Lux* is political. What are the rewards of this work for you?

The reward is definitely when the work is meaningful to our readers, or they tell us they can use it in some way.

Sometimes it can be overwhelming to think about what each of us is doing politically. It's like, "Everything's wrong. What can I do? I should be involved in this, I should be involved in that." I really try to think in terms of the magazine making a contribution. One magazine is not going to solve our political apocalypse, but one magazine can be a great source of strength, information, and conversation for a political community. For example, we had an article about unionizing abortion clinics, and then a bunch of clinic organizers had a Zoom call and used the article to talk about the work that they were doing and how it fits into this larger context.

I think because we are a magazine that is obviously interested in those politics and principles, we're able to tackle hard questions in good faith, with a lot of credibility, with the full participation of people we're writing about. People who work on those questions are open to being profiled by us, because they know we're going to take them seriously. We're able to grapple with those knotty questions that might not be engaged with respect or good faith elsewhere. That's a huge reward.

How have you managed a creative path outside of the established system, which seems most visible in a decision to launch Lux?

One advantage I've had is that I edited magazines in places where there were a lot of experienced people for many years before I did something independent. At *Dissent*, I was trained in a certain sort of intellectual work. I was expected to come to an editorial meeting ready to talk about all the topics on the table, like labor organizing in Chicago or the war in Syria. You had to be ready for all of it. That was extremely good training for magazine editing, where you have to work hard to be able to respond intelligently to a writer in any area.

At *The Nation*, I was trained more in hard journalism, such as what it takes for a story to be properly sourced and fact-checked, for example. So when I started *Lux*, there were certain fundamentals that I knew how to do. I also knew a lot of writers at that point. It's sort of about putting together the puzzle pieces.

It's also important to say that I accepted that I was going to make way less money than I had made in a normal job where I had benefits. One of the reasons I was able to give that up was the savings from those salaried jobs. Also, I don't have kids. We absolutely live in a society where if you're responsible for children, the pressure to make money is enormous. There is basically no affordable daycare in New York City. Rent is incredibly high. I was lucky enough to feel like I was gambling a little with my life, but not with anyone else's. At the time, it felt like it was a gamble I could take. I don't pretend that it's easy or sensible, and again, I don't romanticize it.

Even though it's so hard to live in NYC, do you feel the city inspires your creative process?

I'm a big New York City loyalist. I feel like to be a New York City loyalist, you just have to learn how to get your ass kicked on a regular basis and bounce back. You also have to be part of the fight to make it better. I think that's what makes me feel like it's a place where I can just keep fighting, but without the fight, it feels impossible.

Can you walk me through a typical day, if there is such thing as that for you?

Every morning, I get up and listen to the *Financial Times* podcast, and then maybe other newsy things. I really, really like that podcast, because it gives you the news in the least emotional way possible, which is pretty much what I can deal with at eight in the morning.

I check my email, I check Slack. It depends on the day, but my biggest goal is not to be a roadblock for the other editors. Sometimes we'll have an editorial meeting, where we all come together, we consider pitches, we talk about drafts or what we need to commission. We talk about upcoming events. If something is happening in the news, we talk about what our role is in responding to that, if anything.

There are days also where substantial amount of it might be some of the work I do with AJ+. And then often, in the evening, I will try to see friends, or meet a writer, or another editor. My social life and my work life are

for better or worse, mostly integrated, and so I think that's actually one of the great joys of my work is that I get to be around people who I want to be talking with all the time.

What piece of creative advice do you wish you'd had at the beginning of your career?

I think to treat everything as quite experimental. To go into each endeavor trying to learn something, instead of trying to get it right. I think by learning, you ultimately have the best shot of getting it right, but it's important to take that pressure off that you *always* have to know the answer. That commitment to experimentation is tremendously helpful to the creative process.

Sarah Leonard Recommends:

The Art of Joy by Goliarda Sapienza – an unhinged 700-page Italian novel about an impoverished girl who becomes the wealthy, radical matriarch of a sprawling blended family through sheer force of will and a touch of Marxist theory.

The secretive internet presence of our creative director Sharanya Durvasula.

Born in Flames – a 1983 film directed by the great Lizzie Borden about a feminist guerilla army that forms in a socialist-but still patriarchal-future.

Passer by is a real delight of a subscription-everyone featured in the newsletter is a joy to meet.

The photographer Guarionex Rodriguez, Jr. has taken some of my favorite photographs for *Lux*.

Name

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Vocation

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