

On being available for the work you were meant to make



Writer Casey Gerald discusses not worrying about defining yourself, memory as palimpsest, the importance of having a variety of jobs before you make creative work, and the ways in which our lives are our biggest projects.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2765 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#).

When you have a project, how do you decide whether it will be a written project, or an oral/spoken project?

That question makes me think of Lucille Clifton, the great poet. I watched a video of her with Sonia Sanchez some years ago where she was going to read a poem. She said, "These are poems that wanted to be written, and I was available." A lot of times, the thing knows what it wants to be. And when I get it wrong is when I try to force it to be what I most obviously think it should be.

If you had asked me six months ago if I'd be working on this book I would've said absolutely not. There were seeds of it. I had written a long essay, "[The Black Art of Escape](#)," that just came. I'd been thinking about the diasporic mythology of the flying Africans, and wanted to know how we, Black people in this century, in this fucked up country and beyond, might reclaim our inheritance of flight. The form revealed itself over time, in part through watching the films of Chris Marker. I said, "Oh wow. I know I can't make a movie, but what does an essay look like that captures the aesthetic intention of these films?"

I published that in 2019 and moved on. Then Simone Biles withdrew from the Tokyo Olympics, and my friend Anand Giridharadas texted, "This reminded me of your essay," this is two years later. "You should Tweet about it." So I did a little Tweet thread, and people seemed to resonate with the Tweet thread. That was that, I figured. But then, an editor from *The Guardian* reached out and said, "Hey, would you like to write something longer for this? Less than 1,000 words." So I spent a day writing [a 1,000 word op-ed](#), which is a very different thing than a long form literary essay.

I wrote that, and my friend Sarah Lewis said, "Casey, that's a book." And I said, "What?" She said, "Literally, we need that book, it's a short book. You can write it." So that was maybe 6:00 on a Thursday. By the time I went to bed that night I had sketched out what I thought a book might be to my editor, and by Saturday we had agreed that it would be a book.

The reason I meditate a lot is because, going back to what Lucille Clifton said, the work that I've come here to do wants to be done. The fundamental question for me on a daily basis is, am I available for it?

Two things that you said that stuck out to me. One, the idea of being available for the form. There's this quote [Eileen Myles](#) has about being a vessel for these ideas that are out there. The way they put it was, whether they're watching TV or going for a walk, they're always ready for a poem to appear. And when that poem does

appear, to recognize that it came. Do you know what I mean? To see that it came, rather than letting it pass by without noticing it.

I fundamentally believe that the universe is in active collaboration with us at all times. Two days ago, I'm in this Airbnb in the desert, and I hear a thud on the window. I look, and a bird has run into the door, flown into the door, and it's really struggling out there. I'm just standing there, kind of in shock, and then I see, literally in 30 seconds, a cat rushes over and drags the fucking bird away. I said, "Oh my god." Now maybe that's just a bird who had a really bad day. But maybe it's an entire epic, maybe it's an event asking to be meditated on, asking to be made a little larger.

The other thing I thought of when you were talking initially was the importance of friends, and the importance of listening to your community. In the situation where you said a friend pointed out hey, this reminds me of this thing you wrote, and then another friend pointed out and said hey, this is a book. And this idea of having that open communication with a community to help decide how something goes as well.

It's so very important. Again, this goes back to what you believe about the nature of the universe. I believe in the notion of soul pods, that certain souls decided to come into physical form at the same time, and sometimes they meet each other, and sometimes you have to get rid of a lot of people in order to clear the space for your soul pods. And by a lot of people I mean including your family, sometimes. Just this week, for the first time, I'm almost 35 years old, I asked my mother to not contact me. But I see that as part of this whole season. Because the universe is saying, "Hey, we've got this thing that wants to be done, is this person available?" And you can not be available if you've got the wrong people in the workshop of your life.

It goes to what you're saying about how do you know. Sometimes you don't know, that's why finding the right balance between solitude and communion is so vital. The disturbed feelings, the feelings of boredom, or agitation, or anger, or resentment, or misery, or sadness, or depression, often I think are signals that "hey, we've reached the end of the line with this form." It was very useful for a certain period of time. It's just like when you're a writer, you've got to know when the thing has to end.

And to that point, I was talking to some young writers who are interns the other day, and I encouraged them, and I encourage all writers especially, to do something else besides writing.

JFK gave that great speech at Amherst, on artists in society, I think it was in '63, '62. He said our politicians should know poetry, and our poets should know politics. I think the work, especially the literature, is much richer.

We don't get Dostoevsky without him being in that prison, thinking he was going to be executed. I fundamentally believe that I am an artist, and my life is my biggest project.

We interviewed one person who quit his day job and realized he needed that job to create a balance and to keep doing the creative work. So he went back to that. He needed the day job to make his music.

Yes, the historical record is full of extraordinary artists who also had jobs. I actually think it begs a deeper question which is, Who gives a fuck whether you're an artist? Who cares? What does it matter? You are a container of flesh and blood and bone that is carrying around this eternal soul, and that soul is going to be in that container for some period of time, it's going to do multiple things. At some point you're going to die. I truly just don't think it's worth my time to get too caught up in what am I beyond that.

The only thing that matters is, what are you doing today? What are you doing right now? Again, if you feel led, as you're walking down the street and getting a coffee, and a poem comes to you, and you sit on the side of the road and you write the poem, then you are a person who has just stopped and written a poem, and that's enough. You don't have to make some big statement out of it.

If you do that a lot, if you do that every day, or if you do that once a year for 40 years, at the end of your

life you've got 40 poems. And then maybe somebody says, "Oh, they were a poet," but really you were just a person walking down the street and the poems came to you as you walked.

Maybe you got up off the side of the street and you built cars, or you mowed lawns, or you raised a family. I think the more we can divest ourselves from the need to define ourselves, the freer we'll be to do our work and do what we want to do when we need to do it.

Many times people's biggest obstacle is themselves, getting in the way of themselves by over-thinking something, comparing themselves to someone else and feeling like they don't measure up, deciding they're not a "real artist."

I've had so many jobs, and that's one of the other reasons I encourage writers to do other things before they write, because very few professions will you find people who complain so much about the burden of their work.

My grandmother cleaned houses for \$60 a day. I grew up sometimes sleeping on people's floors. I've had a lot of really shit jobs. On my worst day as a writer, it is 10,000 times easier than going and cleaning somebody's toilet for \$60. So I really think it would do writers and artists well to just stop for a second and say, "If it's that awful, don't fucking do it."

All of us are moved in particular ways, and all of us are here for very special reasons. If the thing you're doing is not something that you just find fulfillment and joy and pleasure in doing, then maybe that's just not your jam.

Something you said in one of your TED talks was that we all have this raw, strange magic. The idea of finding magic in the everyday, but also recognizing, "This is something worth noting." When you have these moments, are you jotting them down, are you keeping track? Is this something you store away for later? How are you keeping track of your material, essentially, your life material?

Three ways. One, I keep notes on my phone. Two, I have Moleskine notebooks that I keep track of things. And then three, I do morning pages. Every day, pretty much every day for five years, maybe. Beyond that, I trust that if a thing needed to be recorded and I didn't record it at that time, it'll come back. My experience has been that we subconsciously store a lot more than we know, we just have to sit and allow it to rise to the surface.

It's this process of palimpsest. Before there was paper there was this parchment, right? They'd write and erase and write and erase, and over time even after erasing there were many faint layers stacked on top of each other. I think the memory is like that. So it just takes some time. If you don't feel a sense of failure in the process of tracing or recovering memories, but feel a sense of adventure, that is really cool. At some point I'm going to know what this first layer of parchment was. It's all right that I'm 600 layers away from it.

I appreciate how positive and assured you are of your process. How long did it take to achieve that level of calm with what you're making?

I was terrified. Literally, when I first started I was just waiting for the moment that my editor would ask for the money back. I was terrified, and I've become less terrified, but just last night, I said, "Oh god, what am I doing?" You know, you have those moments of despair. It's taken time, and this is why practice is useful and experience is useful. It's kind of similar to athletes, you've got to get your shots up. You've got to get enough reps in so that you know that yeah, you will have a bad game, you will miss a big shot, you will have a day when you're just off. And it's okay, you'll come back the next day and get back to it. Whereas early in my career I felt that those days were the whole universe, they were existential condemnations of what I was doing.

About two months into writing my first book I got a call that one of my closest friends from Yale had committed suicide. He was like a little brother to me, it was very devastating. Not long after that, I started writing about our time in college, and at a certain point I just couldn't write any more. Part of it was sadness, part of it was just bad luck I guess. I drank some bourbon and I took a nap, and my friend came to me in a dream. He was

sitting in a booth in a diner, and he leaned back and he looked at me and he said, "You know Casey, we did a lot of things that we wouldn't advise anyone we love to do." I woke up, and I just put that dream, transcribed it right into the book. That dream and my friend's visitation totally changed the book, and my life. It became a totally different thing.

From then on, there were many different times where I was lost in terms of what the craft is, what am I supposed to do, whatever. But my friend's visitation helped me realize that I was a vessel for something larger, and that this thing was asking to be made. That fundamentally changed my artistic practice, because I saw it as a collaboration with the universe, with the folks who have come before, with folks who may come after. That my work is needed and desired by something and someone larger and beyond me. So I don't think about an off-day or a shitty attempt at an essay, or "failed" relationship as a mistake. I just ask what if all the things that didn't work were actually just the drafts of the thing that *will* work?

One thing that you were saying before too is that you had a relationship end two weeks ago, and you started the books two weeks ago. Do you find it easier to work when there's not a relationship happening? Or was that just coincidence that these two things happened at the same time?

It's not a coincidence. I don't know. I am on a healing journey myself of learning how to love myself and how to love someone else. And believing that that's part of why I came. Part of why I came is to be in relationship. Not to have a relationship, but to be in relationship, and to have the courage to take the risk of love. To take the risk of loving myself and someone else, and to believe that I don't have to be alone to do my work, that I don't have to be alone and miserable to be an artist.

I am aspiring to keep learning that, and keep living that. What I have found, is that my relationships, even when and if they end, have provided extraordinary material—spiritual material, emotional material—for my work. I'm not just talking about scenes in a book. I tell people all the time, you can't ask a sentence to do something that you can't do as a human being, that you're unwilling to do as a person. So, to really show up for a relationship, at least in my experience, allows me to build new psychic, emotional, physical, spiritual muscles that make my work so much richer. I think more and more and hope more and more, especially in this time, we as artists can learn and believe and show that being miserable, and being unhappy is not our destiny. It's not what we've been sentenced to, and it also is not the highest expression of things that we want to make.

Casey Gerald Recommends:

Writing longhand

The films of Chris Marker (read [this piece](#) for a great primer)

[Willow House](#), in Terlingua, Texas & the [Big Bend Region](#) more broadly.

The poetry & practice of [Lucille Clifton](#)

This line from Kendrick Lamar's "[Ab-Soul's Outro](#)" on Section.80, which is my stance on the idea of being a "marginalized" artist or working "on the margins": "I'm not on the outside looking in, I'm not on inside looking out I'm in the dead fucking center looking around."

Name

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Vocation

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