



To help you grow your creative practice, our website is available as an email.

Subscribe

September 9, 2024 -

As told to Celeste Scott, 2573 words.

Tags: Writing, Beginnings, Day jobs, Inspiration, Collaboration, Creative anxiety.

# On how life experience prepares you for your creative work

Writer Deesha Philyaw discusses truth-telling, how a corporate job can help you creatively, and the importance of mentorship and community. You co-host two podcasts, [Ursa Short Fiction](#), which explores short fiction, and most recently, [Reckon True Stories](#), which explores new and classic nonfiction. In the inaugural episode of [Reckon True Stories](#), you say that you have fiction that you've passed off as essays and essays that you've passed off as fiction-

Dammit! I knew that was coming back to haunt me.

**I was so intrigued by that! Could you say more about how you think about truth-telling as it relates to both fiction and non-fiction?**

So, John Edgar Wideman, who is a writer I admire... I don't remember if this was an essay of his or an interview, but he said all stories are true. And I remember reading that in the early years of starting to write. So, this idea of truth-telling for me, even in fiction, because he writes both fiction and non-fiction, was really compelling. I took it as sort of a mandate that even in fiction, the story needed to be true to the human experience. Which of course is vast. But the reason these are stories in the world and not journal entries is that we're hoping they're going to ring true, literally to someone else. Whether it's fiction or nonfiction. That's what I feel like I've been chasing in my fiction.

As far as the non-fiction, you would think, "Okay, well non-fiction, it's easier to tell the truth, because it's like here's what happened." But there's so many versions of what happened, right? There's mine, there's the other person's, all the other people who were there have their versions. There's my version when I was 10, and then there's my version when I'm 30 when I'm reflecting.

Kiese Laymon and I were doing an event last night with [Ryan Nave](#) of Reckon Media. And we were talking about how in a single piece of writing you could say, "Well, this happened." But then in another world, in an alternate universe, it happened this way. And then in yet a third world, it happened this way. And all of those ways, all of those worlds are true and exist. So, there's a lot to be said for perspective. There's a lot to be said for time. So, when I said some of my fiction is fact, that's not shocking. A lot of fiction can be autobiographical. There's a seed of us, there's a kernel of us, I like to say, of me or of my mom in my stories.

But I know what's more provocative is the idea that some of the facts, some of the non-fiction, is fiction. What I meant by that is, I was thinking of one essay of mine in particular that is part of sort of a triptych of short micro essays that I wrote. The parts that are fictionalized are like, these conversations didn't actually happen, but people do things without saying, "This is what I'm doing and this is why I'm doing it." That's what I was writing about. Things that really happened, but the conversations around them were imagined, if that makes sense.

**You mentioned something earlier about journaling and how something can be a journal entry, or it can be a non-fiction piece, or a story. How do you know that something is more than just a journal entry?**

I think when it starts to take on, whether it's fiction or non-fiction, when it starts to take on elements of story. I'm beginning to build a world around them. And are there access points for people other than me? Is there something at stake? All of the things that we talk about with fiction and storytelling, those

elements usually aren't present in a piece of writing that's just sort of off the cuff, journal, meditation, meditative sort of writing.

I jotted down something recently about a new relationship that I'm in. Something that I discovered about myself in that relationship. Something like a hard revelation. I jotted it down as it occurred to me, and I was like, "I don't want to write this as an essay, but I definitely feel like I can give this to a character." So, there's some of that there, where it may start as just my most earnest, most visceral feelings, and then I give it to a character and as part of her world.

**Totally.**

So, that's one way it can happen. And then for essay, I think we talked about this in the first episode of the podcast where I thought I was writing an essay, but I had two mentors tell me, "No, this is a journal entry. This is not art." There's some intangibles that go into that transition. For me, the intangibles were time, therapy, and maturity. And getting better at writing and actually learning how to tell a story. And also your intentions matter. So, I thought I was writing something for publication, but it was almost like I was writing something for sort of vindication or validation, which are all good reasons to write, but that's not necessarily ready for prime time. And that's okay. That 20-page essay I wrote about my father wasn't a failure just because it wasn't appropriate for publication. It was a draft. That's what drafts are. They're our first approximation at the real thing.

**Given this kind of commitment to truth-telling that you have in your work, have you ever been apprehensive to publish a short story or an essay for fear that a certain person might read it and recognize themselves?**

Some of the hardest things I've written about in terms of essay and stories, I guess both, have to do with my parents. But both of my parents are deceased. So, they might recognize themselves if it's disguised in the fiction. But when I've written about, let's say my father and his failings, I have sisters. I'm my mother's only child, but my father had five daughters. And my sisters had their own experiences of him. But I think we all get to tell our own stories. So, I never worried like, "Oh, they're going to think this." Because I'm only telling about me. I'm not telling about them. In my story, "Dear Sister," obviously that's autobiographical, but I didn't want any of my sisters to go, "Wait a minute, that's me." So, some of the things might ring true because we had these experiences, but I'm talking about my part. My aunts have copies of my book. I don't know if they read it [laughs]. So, I was mostly concerned about them reading about the sex in the book. So, at an event when they came and got copies and I signed them, I said, "Okay, so read it, but don't text me about it. Text each other."

[laughs]

I've been very careful to write about how I write about my first ex-husband because he is the father of my children. And my children on occasion do read my writing. Not that I sugarcoat anything, but just being respectful that none of us want to read things about our parents that are less than admirable. But luckily with him, there's nothing I want to tell that would paint him in a bad light.

But then, finally, there is my second ex-husband, who I'm only in the last couple of years getting around to writing honestly and candidly that he was abusive. And it is interesting, because that approximation I was talking about earlier, where privately I would write very openly, very clearly about what that relationship was and who he was in it. And then I [wrote] a couple of essays, and then a couple a year later, and each time I'm more and more honest. I protect him less and less as time goes on. And then it was actually not in an essay, but in an interview with someone when I finally said publicly that he was abusive. So, I don't know that I need to revisit that abuse in an essay.

**Yeah.**

Something about that interview felt very healing that I said it publicly in that way. But I don't, obviously don't give a damn about him or protecting him. But he also has children. My stepdaughters. And they were my stepdaughters who I still care about. So, I think about them.

**I was encouraged to hear that you were working full time kind of up until recently-ish. How did you balance working in the corporate world and dedicating time to writing?**

So, just for context, I started writing in the early 2000s. And I was freelancing. And that corporate job was only three years in the course of the 20... Gosh, 25. Almost 25 years of writing. But actually the benefit of that job, and it was not hard to balance, it was actually easier than when I was freelancing. Because I wasn't worried as much about money. And so I had more creative energy and brain space left over to actually do my creative work. As opposed to when I was freelancing, and the idea was, "Oh, I'm doing all this other work to pay the bills and I'm buying myself time to work on my creative work." I was doing it in bits and pieces. It was just such a slow process over, really two decades. The benefit of the corporate job is that it freed me up mentally to do the creative work. But at the same time, because I was dealing with a difficult manager, it was a drain on me. So I was kind of balancing those things. But to answer your question, I think I just remembered why I was there. Like this job is not going to be my identity. I'm here for the financial stability so that I can get my creative work done. I have to do the same thing now, even though I don't have a nine to five, which is prioritizing the writing, which means saying no to other people and other things at certain times so that I can get the work done.

**Something else that you mentioned in that first episode of Reckon True Stories is how you wrote a column**

**for a publication called *Literary Mama*. And how that was kind of your own personal MFA. Could talk a little bit more about that and any other experiences early on in your writing journey that were kind of similar?**

So, I was being edited by two editors who were assigned to me for my column. In the columnist group, we had an E-list where everybody shared their drafts. And if you had time, you weighed in. So, potentially I could have a dozen more writers that I admire weighing in on my work. And as beneficial as that was to me, it was weighing in on their essays - that whole thing about how you can see the splinter in somebody else's eye, but you miss the plank in your own. You can see the things in other people's work that's not working so much more easily than you can your own. I learned a lot from that process as well.

I was always just going to writer conferences and taking writing workshops, and one pivotal one was the Hurston/Wright Summer Writers Week in 2007 with Mat Johnson. That was life-changing. That one was where I felt like I'm a real writer, that I could possibly finish a book-length project. Having another writer like Mat be so encouraging and excited about my work, even as a draft. He wasn't saying, "Oh, yes, this is ready for the world." But he saw the bones and was encouraging me around the bones of it. I also met an agent there that was interested in my work. All of that was very encouraging to me.

I read a lot of craft books, like everything I could get my hands on. I think one of the best things that writers can do is read widely. You can tell right away a writer who doesn't read. To me, it just jumps off the page. I consider reading to be part of my writing process.

**You mentioned some of the people that you met along the way. What role has mentorship and community has played in your writing career, and how did you go about seeking out those relationships?**

Absolutely essential. I would not have a writing career if I did not have community and mentors. When I was in Pittsburgh early on, looking for any opportunity to connect with other writers, I went to this workshop that was at...University of Pittsburgh has a campus, I think it's in Greensburg, which is just up the road from Pittsburgh. That was, I think, the first writing workshop I ever went to. At lunchtime this woman sat down next to me and she was working on a Western. She was writing genre fiction, and I was trying to write literary fiction at the time. It was a novel that I was working on. We were commiserating around where we were stuck. I was like, "I'm not finishing. I feel so isolated. I feel so disconnected." And she was like, "You got to connect with other writers in Pittsburgh." She lived outside of Pittsburgh. And I was like, "I don't know any writers." And she's like, "You got to know somebody." And I said, "Well, there's this guy, this Black man who writes for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. He's an editor, he's a columnist. I really like his stuff." Pittsburgh is a small, big town. She knew Tony. His name is Tony Norman. And she's like, "Oh, he's the nicest guy. I interned at the *Post-Gazette*. Reach out to him when you get back home." That, to me, was so daunting. But I sent him this very kind of nervous email and introduced myself and said I wanted to be a writer. And he wrote me back right away and said, "You're already a writer. Let's have lunch." I thought I was so fancy because this real writer wanted to take me to lunch. He still is my mentor and my friend.

I've met other mentors along the way who have encouraged me. I found other writers either on the ground in Pittsburgh or in virtual spaces where we would swap writing and be readers for each other. That's been going on for 20-plus years. Having those early readers has been essential to me. When the pandemic first hit, getting on Zoom and having co-working sessions. I still participate in co-working sessions on Zoom. It's something about that reminder that you're not alone, that is essential to me when I'm working. Don't talk to me, but we're here working together separately. I love that.

Then of course, meeting people like Kiese, and Robert Jones, and Nafissa Thompson-Spires, and Dawnie Walton, and Jamila Minnicks, those are the folks that I talk to almost every day. In one way or another, we're keeping each other lifted and encouraged. Absolutely essential.

**Deesha Philyaw recommends:**

Lime Crime's Velvetines Liquid Lipstick in Black Velvet

kissing

lobster rolls

going to a nude beach

San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

Name

Deesha Philyaw

Vocation


writer

Fact


---

---

Related to Writer Deesha Philyaw on how life experience prepares you for your creative work:

 [Author Kiley Reid on money and day jobs and creative work](#)

 [Writer Arriel Vinson on waiting until you're ready to get serious about your work](#)

 [Writer Tajja Isen on taking the time to find your rhythm](#)

---

The Creative Independent is ad-free and published by [Kickstarter](#), PBC. See also: [Terms](#), [Privacy Policy](#).



1