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As told to Eva Recinos, 2523 words.

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On taking the time to find your rhythm

Writer Tajja Isen discusses making space for creative work, dealing with rejection, and being kind to the past versions of yourself. You've been on both sides of the publishing world—as an editor, considering submissions, and as a writer who produces their own work. Switching between those hats seems to have influenced your approach to writing as a craft and your thoughts on the business of writing. You wrote a chapter in *Some of My Best Friends* on the personal essay industry, which I thought was interesting. Now that you're anticipating the release of your second book, what does it feel like to be switching hats again?

That's a big question. I've always found both sides—both the editorial and the writing—very complementary and mutually reinforcing. It was being edited that both made me a better writer, and originally made me want to be an editor. Editing other people's work improved my own. And the more I write, the more I feel like I have to offer other writers. So I've always thought of the two as intertwined.

You're totally right that working on both sides has opened up this weird third space, where sometimes the business itself becomes the object of the things that I write and think about.

I feel like often in publishing, when I'm faced with a particular problem or conundrum, I turn that problem or conundrum into an essay. I've had recent work on writing a new subtitle for the book or the expectations that writers produce promotional essays, which I wrote for *Vulture*. So certainly my work on both sides of the divide has started to inform the subjects that I write about. I also think—just in a nuts and bolts way—editorial work was what made my writing financially possible for a long time. The bulk of the writing I've done has been alongside a full-time editorial job, which, of course, comes with both advantages and drawbacks.

I'm really lucky now that I have this fellowship at *Black Mountain Institute* at University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where I really have—for the first time—a sustained, focused period to really sink into the next book.

You touched on this briefly, but one thing we like to ask about is people's day-to-day routine. Do you structure your days based on the writing assignments that you need to get done versus editing work, or what are some of the other tasks on your to-do list that you balance with the rest of the work?

I don't have a full-time editorial job right now, which is kind of amazing because it means that I do treat the writing as a 9:00 to 5:00 job as part of this fellowship. Again, it's an incredible privilege to have this time to just do the book. I put my column at *The Walrus* on pause, I don't have other assignments right now, so it's really just, like: wake up, book. But ordinarily, I guess, I was really just a "pockets of time" person. I wasn't especially disciplined about getting up early in the morning. I do find that writing and editing draw on the same reserves of power and creativity.

With this fellowship, have you structured your time rigidly, or has there been some space to figure out what you want your day to look like?

Yeah, it's been total flexibility. I put a lot of pressure on myself at the beginning of the fellowship to start being really disciplined about my routine as quickly as possible, but found in practice that that wasn't what served the work. I needed to, first of all, get used to the fact that I had just moved most of the way across the country. And secondly, I needed time to get into the headspace of the project. The next book is about mentorship. I'm reading a lot of memoirs of mentorship. I'm reading a lot of psychoanalysis. I'm reading a lot of theory. I'm also just like, thinking more deeply into my own life and psychology than

I ever have in previous projects. That took time and space. I couldn't sit down right away at 9:00 AM on the first day of the fellowship and get going. So, yeah, it took me a while to find my rhythm.

I think that's interesting because it can sometimes feel hard to give yourself grace or to make room for the things that aren't just the making of the work, right? It's interesting to hear the idea of giving yourself space for all the other things that are just "life" things.

Especially when what you write about is your life. Because I've truly never had this gift of time before. So I think that was part of the pressure, too, like, "Oh, my gosh, now that I can focus on my writing full-time, I have to make this time count. I have to make it worth it." I had to negotiate between that very real question and not putting too much pressure on myself. And also letting myself take a bit of time to breathe.

In *Some of My Best Friends*, you write about how in your younger years, particularly when you were in law school, you had a tendency to overwork, to want to fill in all the gaps, with productivity and hit all these goal posts. How have you pushed against that in recent years?

I didn't want to admit to myself that the thing I really hoped to commit to was a creative life. I think I hoped that if I immersed myself in a program, a career track, a professional identity, as fully as possible, I would be able to get that fulfillment somewhere else. That just is not really what happened in practice. Leaving the degree and taking some time to think about what it was I both wanted and was running from, I understood that I wanted to put my own artistic practice more at the center of my life, whatever that looked like. If I really wanted to do that, I couldn't be working myself into the ground. I've been variably successful at that since those six or seven years since I've graduated. Sometimes I have said "yes" to every opportunity that seemed cool and wound up over committing myself and taking on too much. But I think that period of my life was very instructive because it showed me what was and wasn't sustainable.

That leads me to another question. Just in my own experience as a writer, I feel like social media channels can really amplify a writer's doubts about their craft or career trajectory. It's so easy to compare where you are to where someone else might be. I'm wondering if you have any advice for writers who might be feeling this pressure.

Literary Twitter is not real life. It can be so easy to confuse the two because you're like, "this is my job, this is my community, this is my identity." But it is just such a different thing from the craft and practice and labor and community of writing. Recognizing that gap is really key. Another thing that's useful to separate is the process and the work of writing from the process of publishing. I think it's very easy to conflate the two or to feel like you have to jump the track from writing to publishing as soon as possible. But when I talk to younger writers, when I talk to emerging writers, it's really important to me to equip them with the tools to understand and navigate the industry. To make that knowledge part of their professional toolkit, but also to tell them like, "you can defer that for as long as possible." In fact, it's good for you and good for the work if you defer the question of publication for as long as possible. There is no rush. Your work will only get better. You will only become a more sure and confident version of yourself in life and on the page. Market pressures are wild. There is no need to subject yourself or your work to them before you are absolutely ready to do so.

Along those lines, how has your perception, or your relationship to, rejection changed over the years? Especially as someone who has been on both sides of publishing, and is now talking to younger and emerging writers about this process?

Rejection is always difficult. But I think the thing that has made it easier for me is—I almost feel like the writing that I've done about the publishing industry has been a way to process and contextualize that. And I think having a deeper understanding of the business side of things has helped me take rejection less personally.

The other thing that helps me take it less personally is applying more widely. Just normalizing the process of putting out a bunch of feelers into the world, at least for me, makes it feel like each individual sting hurts less because it's diffused over a wider field of attempts. And it also just feels good to be in that space of momentum and constantly trying to push yourself and grow and aim high and apply for ambitious things—even if you're not sure you're going to get it. It can feel affirming to even have to write the artist's statement when you put your application together for that big grant. If I'm talking to writers who are trying to place a story or who are trying to just get more bylines—and they're ready for that pitching and publishing stage—I do encourage them to aim both high and wide.

One thing that also struck me about the book was that you give a lot of space to the writing and also songwriting that you did as a teenager, because it made me wonder about the attention or the weight that we give or don't give to our younger creative selves. Why was it important for you to include in the book?

It was important to me to show the creative work that often just goes on in obscurity. That was a big, significant period of my life. I didn't go to law school right away. I spent two years out of undergrad, and I was like, "I'm going to try and make this musician thing work." And it was a labor of love until it wasn't. And so I was like, "You know what? Actually, I want a little bit more control of my life." It was part of the same ongoing negotiation of trying to figure out how much of myself and my time and my energy do I want to dedicate to trying to be an artist in whatever genre? Giving that space in the book was a way of contextualizing the place that those years occupy in my life now... it's a point on a line of my development. And I hope there's usefulness to other creative people to see that, to be like, "Oh, she

worked in a different genre. She gave it a go for a decent period of time, and then her career shifted in this particular direction.”

Because the shift towards writing was very organic and very much an outgrowth, or continuation, of my songwriting. My partner always reminds me to be kind to past versions of yourself. And I think as artists, there’s a lot of power in that. There’s so much drive to improve and produce and develop and be new. But I think part of doing that process, honestly and well, is not being cruel to the artist that you used to be.

With these essays and your writing at large, you really are diving into a lot of areas. You’re diving into legal history and pop culture and literature, the Internet. How do you keep your research organized when you’re working on a long-form piece or working on a book?

It varies a lot depending on the project. So for *Some of My Best Friends*, for each essay, I designed myself a syllabus. I was like, “Who are the essential writers and thinkers in the space? What are the conversations that I want to be participating in?” And I made myself a reading list, and the process of each essay was mostly similar. It was like, “I’m going to immerse myself in this little canon, and I’m only going to start writing once I have a sufficient sense of the conversations, and I feel my original contribution to those conversations bubbling up and out of me. I know what I’m going to say. That means I’m ready to write now.”

Whereas with *Tough Love*, the mentorship book that I’m working on now, it’s very different—in part because this next book is primarily a memoir, even though it does incorporate elements of research and criticism. Whereas [in] *Some of My Best Friends* personal narrative, was one among many strands, the story here in *Tough Love* is a personal one. The other reason why my approach for this book is a little more esoteric is because there’s not a sort of established mentorship canon the same way there’s an established conversation of, “these are the people who have written about the history of the personal essay,” or “these are the people who have written about the evolution of the concept of diversity and legal precedent.” I’m assembling my own canon, drawing on memoir, literary criticism, psychoanalysis.

As a fun closing question, when you’re not reading and writing, what are some of your hobbies? Or, what would you like to do more often?

Well, for the past few months, since I’ve been in Vegas, it’s been hiking. It’s been transformative for me. I’m not always good at remembering that I have a body. I think living somewhere like New York, it’s very easy to forget. It’s like, I’m just a brain in a jar. I sit here in my little apartment, and I tappity-tap away on my laptop. But being in the desert has totally, like, re-arranged my mind. And part of that is by re-teaching me how to be a body out in nature. So that’s become a big hobby. I watch a lot of television. I love TV.

Honestly, I really value this question because I’m very aware that I’m not great at having hobbies, and it is something that I want to be better at. Quite often when I get asked, “Oh, what are your hobbies?” I’m like, “Reading.” And they’re like, “What is a hobby that doesn’t have anything to do with work?” That’s a learning process for me. Living in a different city, being able to get out into nature, having this very nourishing pastime that has absolutely nothing to do with the literary [world] has been really restorative for me.

Tajja Isen Recommends:

Pulling over to buy what the farm advertises on its roadside stand

Hiking in the desert

Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face*

Stovetop popcorn

Writing down (by hand!) passages from books you’re thinking with

Name
Tajja Isen


Vocation
writer


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