On vulnerability, playfulness, and keeping yourself honest

Writer, thinker, and activist adrienne maree brown on new approaches to social justice, building on the knowledge of those who have come before, and why pleasure is so important to feeling healthy.

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As told to Anupa Mistry, 2743 words.

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What have you discovered about the ways that vulnerability and imperfection function within social justice movements, as well as the thinking and writing around these movements?

There's a lot that keeps those in movement—i.e. people working within a social movement—from risking vulnerability. One of the major things I'm always trying to navigate is, "Am I being as vulnerable as I need to be in order to keep growing as a human being and keep learning?" And, "Am I being vulnerable enough that people can experience my humanity?" Many people get into movement work because they're actually directly impacted, or they're indirectly impacted but directly accountable. Almost immediately what I see is that people always think someone else has it worse, so they're not going to talk about what's hard for them.

We hit what feels like a precipice of vulnerability, and then people back off because they think there are others who have it much worse and that's the true thing that needs to be attended to. It never ceases to amaze me that the best humans are almost always thinking of others. But what that does to our vulnerability is it keeps us from being able to say and do the things we need to do to bring our own needs into the room. That does us a great disservice, even though the orientation of, "Who's missing?" or "Who should be here?" has good intentions. It keeps us from remembering that each of us is actually negatively impacted by these same systems.

So: there's real harm, and then there's real distinctions of harm. Yes, we're all in the apocalypse, and going through an unfolding of everything we've understood to be functional society. We're facing those things together, but it's actually very different if you are an undocumented immigrant, right? There's vulnerability of the heart, vulnerability of the spirit, and then there's also being actually vulnerable in terms of your social status. The best practices I've seen so far have just been to face it as directly as possible.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha is doing really beautiful work and writing about Disability Justice. It's really important to understand vulnerability as a technical terminology for people who are like, *If this doesn't go well, I literally won't have a way to get around.*

Have you encountered resistance to these ideas of focusing on your needs as a way to be more accountable?

Oh, yeah. I think it's an intelligent resistance, because folks can very quickly slip to the other side, where now the only thing that matters is having their needs met.

I remember a time when people used to show up with an expectation that as a movement person, they were co-

creating what was happening in the space. Now there's so much more of a consumption mindset: Here's my long list of needs, and you better meet every single one of them, or I'm calling a protest on this gathering, or I'm going to, in some other way, disrupt the peace. Instead of asking, *How do I weave together what my needs are with what y'all have the capacity to offer, and help shape this over time?*

I think that's the beautiful thing about Disability Justice. If we live in a society that benefits those in the most vulnerable physical, emotional, mental positions, then we actually create a society that works for everyone. We don't necessarily have the capacity to address all the harm that happens in our movement spaces right now, but we do have the capacity to continuously try to be creative around how we co-create those things.

I'm constantly trying to get us out of an expectation that someone's going to do it for us, and into an expectation that we have to begin to practice some different things. Being honest when there's a limitation to what we can practice. I want to be in communities where vibrant, quick motion of [urgent, emergency] work can be tied in and accountable to much slower processes that help set a direction of actions that are meaningful for a community.

What does personal accountability or personal healing look like in creative work, or work that is more amenable to personal narratives or interiority? What are some of the blind spots that creative workers might have, that your ideas might address?

Taking away exceptionalism. We're never actually doing something on our own. I definitely have that desire to go off and be like, "Okay, now I'm just doing my own thing." But that's never actually the truth. I'm doing a thing in relationship to a long lineage of people who've done this, and hopefully ahead of people who will do this. Even if it feels like breaking new territory or ground, it's only because of the spaces and people that you are in relationship with in this particular moment.

We have relationships and accountability to the kinds of stories we tell. Art is either upholding the status quo, or disrupting the status quo. Class, race, gender, sexism, nationalism, militarism… the toxic energies of our time want to come through us. They want to come out. They need to be rewritten, and we have to be conscious about how that happens, so that we're not writing the same narrative.

You often write and talk about your work as part of the lineage of people like Audre Lorde, Octavia Butler, and Grace Lee Boggs. Why should we be similarly explicit in citing our work?

It helps me to say that I'm working at the intersection of Octavia Butler, Toni Cade Bambara, and Audre Lorde's work, so that person knows I'm thinking as a Black feminist, thinking about relationality, fractals and patterns. It puts a certain scaffolding in place for the conversation.

Also, I love that I can't explain everything. I don't have all the answers, and can't think all the thoughts, but it helps to say, "If you like this line of thinking, you can go and develop your own interaction with these ancestors." Each of these people didn't create one pathway forward but many pathways, and we kind of time travel their lives forward and further than they could possibly imagine. To me that scale is more interesting than, like, "30 people liked this thing on social media today." In a society where the status quo tells you you're not powerful, you have evidence to the contrary because you know a Black feminist who changed your life. Audre Lorde wasn't the first Black president, but she maybe has had more impact on people's actual transformative potential, than the first Black president. Like, I would be very surprised if [Barack Obama] wasn't a fan of her work, given how he orients himself.

That kind of thing excites me. The idea that none of the ideas are new helps me to relax. I can't really fuck it up, right? I'm iterating, and I write from a place of real questions. I'm very rarely posing something rhetorically. The question behind *Pleasure Activism* is, how can we make justice and liberation the most pleasurable experiences we could have as human beings? I don't know the answer, but I feel spacious to ask because Audre Lorde had hypotheses, and I trust her. I trust all the thinking she did, and I want to continue those questions. I don't presume to be at her level, but I want to be on her playground. In some ways, my greatest legacy might be that I spent my life getting a ton of people to read some of the most important Black

women writers of our time. I'm okay with that.

In a time of access to more information, doesn't it seem like people are scared of iterating? Or maybe it's the opposite: pressure to produce an original idea.

Yeah, I mean, capitalism! But capitalism does a lot of that: making us feel like if something's not new, it doesn't really have worth. I'm fascinated that ideas come through my mind in a way that I can't automatically trace them back to someone else having put them there. It feels important to me to have that experience of, say, understanding something different about patriarchy than I ever understood before.

I like the duality that things can occur to you in an original way, but you're not trying to claim that no one's ever had that thought before. There are a few realms where people are doing seriously original thinking, but very rarely does that happen in a vacuum. I was developing the ideas for *Emergent Strategy* while Complex Movements, which is also based here in Detroit, was coming up with a different set of emblems and codes for understanding a lot of the same ideas. Instead of being like, "Mine's better," or "Yours is better," it's like, here are two frameworks that interact with each other. Let's learn from both. We could be doing a lot more of that if we were less concerned with being the first one to reach the idea, which feels like a very colonial misinterpretation of what's even possible on this little planet of ours.

Tarot, astrology, and fiction feed into your writing, and movement-oriented work, which to me scans as a real embrace of the unknown. What are the benefits of being playful with your work, or maybe not taking your work so seriously?

There's always going to be a part of me that's laughing at my own earnestness, so considering my own insignificance always makes me laugh and helps me relax. Everyone's like,"Am I doing enough? Can I do more? Does my life matter? Do people like me?"

I think I do my best work when I'm not concerned about how it's going to be received, and when I'm really in touch with what I feel is the most true part myself. I just spent a couple of days around my niblings—my sister's kids—and they are such good teachers because they're so honest. "I like this. Now I don't. And I'm enjoying this. And now I don't." It's such a good reminder that most of us don't want to do the same thing over and over again, every day of our lives. It's actually not our nature. Humans have done so much to make ourselves still and rigid and routine, and some people get comfort from that. I guess, as a Virgo, I'm supposed to be comforted by that! But I enjoy routines, as long as I know I can change them whenever I want.

The harder truth that you have to get in contact with as a human being is that you don't know for sure. Everything we're doing is our best-case scenario, best hypothesis. Since I can't guarantee that in the future it will be impactful, what I try to do is live each day as if I'm in that future. Like, I want to live in a world where nobody was lying to each other, and we said exactly what we were feeling and thinking with as much kindness as possible. Then I did that, and got much different results than I've ever gotten from like, lying, or just being polite.

Or doing things the way you think you're supposed to do them.

Yes. I always make the distinction between "right" versus "right relationship." So not doing something that's right for the entire planet in terms of how we're supposed to be, but having the right kind of relationship to the planet. That is something we can feel our way into, and the most devastating thing on Earth right now is that there's so many people who've been cut off from being able to feel that. That's a big part of my life: How can I make you feel pleasure to remind you about the miracle? The miracle's there. Enjoy it.

How do you not freak people out with these ideas: miracles, vulnerability, trusting in your feelings, intuition, right relationship versus doing what's right?

I don't do a lot of promotion of my work. This has been the interesting thing I've been able to pull off. I had

done a lot of work as a facilitator in movement spaces before I got to a place of being like, “Here’s what I’ve got to share with other people.” I was writing my blog, but I was like, here I am acting, you know, here I am doing this thing. I very rarely feel like I’m trying to convince anyone of anything. I’m like, here’s something that’s working for me. That’s how I approach whatever it is I’m trying to put out to the world: This is helpful, this is good, this is something I figured out. If it feels true to me, then I’m like, I didn’t create these things. I didn’t make miracles. Miracles are. So the question then gets flipped a bit into, “Why would you not be interested in living in a miraculous way?”

And then I love blending with fear, because I feel a lot of fear myself. So much of the work I do in somatics is just that: We’ve been trained to be afraid of our own yes, and what feels good in our lives. Get curious about that. Who benefits from you being terrified to be happy? As long as you’re afraid to be happy, you’ll not pursue the very things that would require the system to change, require the system to accommodate everyone’s joy, instead of just the joy of a few rich people at the top. That kind of systems change is of deep interest to me.

What do you do when you’re creatively stuck?

I usually switch up what I’m doing. When I’m in the active mode working on a book, I will go for a swim or a walk if I don’t know where to go with an idea. Almost always, when I’m in the pool, I’ll quickly be like, “Got it.” If we move ourselves off of the fast track, there’s usually a little bit of room. You need space to integrate. I’ll go have an orgasm. That really unlocks and creates a different kind of energy and space. If I’m trying to write fiction, I’ll shift over and see if there’s nonfiction available. Or a conversation to have. I’m always hungry for creative time so it’s very rare that I get it and feel stuck in any way.

Your work life seems pretty intertwined with your creative life. What does a respite from productivity look like to you?

I’m always trying to figure that out. One thing is being in a space where I’m not producing. I’m heading towards a sabbatical now and building a stack of books to take with me. I’m kind of excited about the idea of traveling with a suitcase of books, and very few clothes. And then leaving the books in different libraries and spaces as I go. I’d love to do that. Or just not come home until I’ve finished all these books! For me, reading for fun and pleasure is a huge way that I know I’m in respite time. Being in a space where I can have an experience, like taking a mushroom trip or something like that, and just be totally free to go into those altered states—that’s often a way that I know I’m in respite time. And then I turn off the phone. I’m getting better at that. I’ve become really big about not sleeping with my phone near me, and doing mornings without being on the phone. Giving myself that first hour of awake time that’s just my own. It’s one of the fastest life-changing strategies.

adrienne maree brown recommends:

Getting naked in front of your mirror and finding something you love about your body.

Calling a friend that you miss, just to say that you miss them.

Watching Phoebe Waller Bridge’s series *Fleabag*.

Also watching Amanda Seales’ HBO special, *I Be Knowin.’*

Sharpening your revolutionary toolbox. That might look like a number of different things, but really it’s assessing your life and asking: How much am I actually aligned with the revolution of how we are on this planet? What do I need to shift? What personal singular practice can I do right away?

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