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As told to Kailee McGee, 2585 words.

Tags: Writing, Comedy, Beginnings, Multi-tasking, Failure, Creative anxiety.

On learning what you can and can't control

Writer, comic, and performer Mitra Jouhari on balancing a variety of creative projects, managing an obsessive work ethic, and knowing how much of yourself you're comfortable sharing with the public.

You've been doing the bi-coastal life for awhile now. How do you stay healthy mentally and physically while traveling and relocating all the time?

I definitely don't travel well, so the past year has been about trying to figure out that exact thing. I'm in therapy; I've been in therapy for almost exactly a year now. That has been the big thing for me: having a weekly therapy session. It has been so helpful because, with the exception of the past couple of weeks that I've been in Iran, whenever I travel, I still do therapy—I just do it remotely.

Also, manufacturing a routine has been helpful. I joined a nice gym, and the gym is located in New York and LA, so I make sure I go regularly in both cities. Also, once I realized that I was going to be going back and forth constantly, I invested in nice luggage. I needed to think of easy clothes that I like, and textures that I like, and scents that I like, and things that I can take with me that I will look forward to interacting with because there's no actual physical space that really feels like mine right now. I have an apartment in New York, but I have been there so rarely this past year that it is pretty much just an expensive storage unit.

What is your day job right now? What are you working on?

When I get back from Iran, I'll be working on *Three Busy Debras*. We did a pilot for Adult Swim, and now we're writing three more scripts—then from there, they're going to decide if we go to series. And then, I'm just doing a bunch of other small stuff, like acting in short films on the weekends and doing live shows in the evenings, things like that.

How do you balance all of these work projects and make time for real life too?

These days, I'm lucky that I will only do stuff that seems really cool to me. This has only just become the case in the past few months. I feel like I'm still fighting the urge to not say yes to everything immediately because I'm just so excited to have been thought of.

Now it's like, okay... I have a family that I want to talk to; I have friends or the person I am dating that I want to hang out with. So, when I say yes to something, that project needs to feel as fulfilling, or almost as fulfilling, as spending time with my people or just laying down. And, I try to make sure that I do stuff everyday that isn't work-related, so that I'm not a maniac. I love work, and I want to be working all the time. So, I have to make myself do the other stuff that also feels good.

Why do you want to work all of the time? Where does that come from?

Well, I really genuinely love all the stuff that I'm doing now. And, I don't have a lot of other skills. Almost all of my friends are in the same field, so everything is so interwoven. But also, I am just a grade-grubby child of an immigrant who needs to thrive in the field of my choice or else I feel very aimless. When I don't have a job or something that I feel like I need to work on, I feel really lost, which hopefully is something I'll figure out in therapy. I've been spending a lot of time with my

therapist talking about when I do have time off, just not knowing what to do with myself. I don't know exactly where that lost feeling comes from.

How did you break into the entertainment business?

The short answer is that as soon as I realized I wanted to do comedy, all of my energy went towards doing that or doing day jobs that would make it easier to do comedy. I was really aggressive.

I did a college improv festival, and at the same time, I really wanted to go to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. One of the performers at my college festival mentioned that his group went to Edinburgh, so I asked for his producer's email and offered to intern.

Then, *The Daily Show* came to my college campus. They had a Q&A session after their show, and I asked how to get an internship. I knew I wanted that internship more than anything in the entire world, so I worked a bunch of extra jobs so I could fly to New York for my interview. And, I ended up getting the internship. All of that led to another internship at *Late Night*, where I was doing transcribing and a bunch of production work while also doing side jobs like writing for *Reductress* and selling mattresses so I could afford improv classes, and also doing ten shows a week, and then finally hosting a show. It was just, like, a million things. I think when one thing finally hit, it was because of all the other things adding up, too.

I knew that I didn't have any connections outside of Ohio, so my only opportunity to go to New York was by doing something embarrassing, like asking for an internship in front of a room full of hundreds of people at *The Daily Show* performance at my college. I'm not necessarily saying that's the best path, but identifying opportunities, and—even if opportunities are rare—then quickly acting on them and then doing a million hours of grunt work, maybe that's how you'll get the job.

Your work environment changes from the stand-up stage, to writer's rooms, to film and TV sets. Do you feel like you have to switch into different versions of yourself to adapt?

I feel pretty consistent. If I'm in a work environment that I don't like, my demeanor will change, and I'll be more guarded. I don't feel like there's a big change with me across mediums mainly because now I mostly do stuff that I like with people who I like, so they know me and what to expect when they hire me. If I feel like I'm not myself, it's just that I don't like where I am or what I'm doing, and hopefully it's either a short job or I'm in a position to change how I feel.

Where and when do you feel the most creative?

I usually feel the most creative in group settings and in writer's rooms. When you're in a good writer's room and you're vibing with the group, it's so exciting to feel the ideas bouncing around, and to really listen to other people and connect with them. The first few weeks of a writer's room on a narrative show are so exciting because you're building the arc of a season, and it's cool to see where that goes.

Alone, if I am in a good groove, I will sit in this one coffee shop that I love in Greenpoint, and I will listen to the same song over and over and over again for, like, six hours. It's so gross. The songs are never beautiful. When I imagine someone listening to music while they write, it's always French music or something. But for me, it's like Charli XCX's "I Got It" for six hours straight. It's psycho.

What is your relationship to your devices?

I think it's getting better. When I feel like I don't have an idea, it's really easy for me to get sucked into looking at a screen. I could always tell that it was a source of negative emotion, but now I've accepted it, and I'm actually trying to do something about it. Before I would just look at other people's lives and careers and bodies and kind of obsess, so it's nice to not do that as much. I sadly don't think it was any grand epiphany that led to me deciding to cool it with the social media obsession—it was just having less free time, and eventually realizing that I was a lot happier when I stopped using my limited space in the day to stare at people I barely knew and feel bad about myself.

Do you ever feel the need to completely disconnect?

Well, I'm currently in Iran visiting family, and it's been pretty nice to have limited access for the past two weeks. So, it takes going across the world... But, yeah, in general, I love Airplane mode. My phone is broken, and the battery dies almost instantly. I just haven't replaced it because it's a forced lack of access throughout the day, which is great because I can't really be as productive if I am near it.

You've said that you don't want your comedy or internet presence to revolve around identity. How do you feel about existing online as an up-and-coming public person?

I like for there to be some distance online, and I don't want to be someone who is tell-all (at least right now). I like to keep certain things and certain people at arm's length. I like for people to feel like they know me, and I want to have a clear voice and a clear aesthetic, but I also want it to all be controlled.

I want to really maintain a chokehold on how I talk about my ethnicity and identity in my art. Sometimes, I get pressured in meetings to talk about ethnicity because it's hot to be brown right now, so that comes up. But, that's not really my comedy. My ethnic identity and my background does play into everything that

I make because it's who I am. It's all inextricably tied together and interwoven. I want to talk about it in a way that feels responsible and true. It's so important to me, and I need to treat it with care. I am wary of people who I can tell will not. I really like to control what parts of my life I talk about.

How do you find a balance between what to share or not share online? Is your Instagram you, or is it a persona?

It feels like some version of me. If I feel hot, then I'll post a hot picture. If I feel goofy, then I'll post a goofy picture. But, it's the same with all of the art that I make—it's all at arm's length. I'm not going to grant people access to certain intimate parts of my emotional or private life. But, I don't mind being honest about how I feel about stuff. I just want to protect the parts of my life that are precious to me and only share what I feel comfortable sharing.

Do you feel that you are vulnerable online?

I try to be. I am vulnerable on my own terms. When it comes to political stuff, which I'm very passionate about—especially with things like the Muslim Ban, which personally affects me and my family—I try to be honest about how it affects us because I think that is the only way to get people to engage or understand.

How does anxiety play a part in your life?

I'm a really neurotic person, but writing really makes me feel like I'm in control. Spending a good chunk of the day writing helps me. I didn't finish college, but I had a great professor who got me into the habit of just writing nonsense for 30 minutes every day. That habit has stuck.

I am always anxious that I'm not doing enough, or that I'm not working hard enough, or that I'm just not producing things that are of the quality that I would like them to be, or that I'm not challenging myself in the right way or reading enough or watching enough or whatever. But the writing helps!

When self-doubt strikes, how do you work through it and move past it?

When I am writing for a live performance, I am always convinced that I will bomb. Before every show, I spend the whole day in a blackout state freaking out and writing. I don't like to do the same stuff more than once, so I tend to write something new each time, which definitely creates an environment that is totally anxiety-ridden every single time I do a show. It's insane, but it is really fun to go try something new and see what works. It's like making bets on what will be funny and what will work every single time. But as a result, I'm just so freaked out the whole day beforehand.

The most anxiety I have is when I'm writing for myself or when I am writing something completely by myself because I'm so used to working in groups. Especially when it's me performing the material. I just worry so much. I trust other people's abilities a lot more than mine for the most part.

The way I get through it is to just push through and control what I can about the situation. I know I can't control my nerves. They're going to happen. But, I can control my environment—for me, I need to be alone at least for a little while before a show in a place that both physically and mentally allows me to clear my head. I need to turn off my phone and listen to music. And, I need to have all my papers around me. It feels really small when I describe it, but it makes a huge difference.

What's the biggest creative failure you've experienced?

I don't know. I feel like I take every failure so hard. I'm so wounded by any and every failure that I'm not even really sure what the biggest one is. Every time I do a show, and I don't feel like I've crushed it, I'm decimated for days.

Failure is a huge part of the creative process. How do you recover and help failure fuel your next endeavor?

Yeah. I'm so frequently unhappy with my own output and what I make of that failure is a really crucial part of my creative process. Everyone who has that crippling sense of dissatisfaction at all times knows that it is so, so powerful. My big failures allow for me to look at and fine tune my process. One time, I didn't book a show that I had a really good shot at making, and I really wanted to get that job. I thought, "Why didn't I get that job? Oh, because I'm not that great at acting on camera." So, I started taking on-camera acting classes, and I felt a lot better. I got better, and I did start booking more. Yeah, so, failures can allow us to diagnose whatever our problems may be.

Mitra Jouhari recommends:

The short film *She Keeps Me Young* written by/starring Blair Beeken and Katy Fullan, dir./edited by Doron Max Hagay.

The song "Pink in the Night" by Mitski

Lost & Found Music Studios on Netflix. A show about musical teens. You'll never see people acting more.

The book *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson

Any video of Lizzo playing the flute. Her Instagram in general is so fun.

Name

Mitra Jouhari

Vocation

Writer, Comedian

Fact



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