

On why you must keep moving



Comedian, writer, and actor Yassir Lester on finding the rhythm that works for you, being present while moving forward, and being comfortable with letting ideas go.

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As told to Rona Akbari, 2759 words.

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You work in comedy, but you do work in comics and sci-fi, too. How do these three worlds influence your work?

Well, it always seems like cartoons and comics generally overlay one another. Cartoons being the comedic and animated version of comic books. Most of my early reading material was comic books. Any big word I learned as a youngster definitely came from comics. I've always been a visual person, so those things have always been very easy to be involved in.

The comedy part of it... I've just always been a goofy idiot, I guess. I realized how, especially as I grew up or got older, we've come to a point where everything is saturated nostalgia. You have people online yelling about *Ghostbusters* and why Will Smith needs to be blue as genie in Aladdin. You're 40, why are we having this conversation? It's just so annoying to me. So with comedy I think it's so much easier to remind people—especially with things like comic books and cartoons—that you should be having fun.

The point of all of this, to me, is to be having fun. It should be fun for you to make, even though it's hard. I'm not saying that having fun in creating is easy, but you still should be having fun, even at its toughest. It should be on both sides. It should be trying to have fun in making something and the point of it is that, when it's done, the person watching or experiencing or reading or whatever, is also having fun.

I think so much of that gets lost. But I think fun is where those things intersect: I'm always trying to find a new way to have people experience fun. I would just say that my most important thing is that people feel good at the end of the day, regardless of what it is. There are other people who want to write dramas about a kid dying and someone putting their life back together, but that will just never be me.

Are there ever moments where you feel like you're drawn away from the fun? Maybe you're online and a lot of these conversations are going on, how do you go back to the fun?

I would say that especially now, it is extremely easy to get drawn out of it, right? I mean everything online has become just a chamber, or a void or an abyss. Twitter, for the most part, has become people either arguing with someone who doesn't agree with them or somehow arguing with someone who *does* agree with them. Instagram is just a constant one-upping of one another. Snapchat, I don't use, but I'm assuming it's just people being insane. Facebook I got off of. None of it really matters because they have all of your information anyway. I don't know why I'm pretending to be on a high horse.

We live in a time when it is extremely easy to get pulled out of anything, right? Culture has shifted in the past two years alone. What was funny two years ago is absolutely not anymore. I'm not even talking about a race thing.

The jokes, things that we used to say as absurdities that would never happen, are now very much a reality. So much of that now is just being like, "god, what are we laughing at? Should we even be having fun right now? This feels crazy." I say all that to get to the point that, regardless of your environment and what's happening online or in the world or whatever, you kinda just have to push through.

I know that sounds so wack and I understand how incredibly privileged that sounds. You can never be ignorant to the world, and you can never fully ignore what's happening. But you *can* control the perspective in which the same information is presented, right? You can control how you filter said info. You can decide to make a sketch or write an essay or a script about said thing that does make it entertaining. I know, again, some people may not find it funny, but I guarantee if it's mostly good, people will find it funny.

For me even, it's hard. I was just talking to my girlfriend Chelsea, who is also a television writer, about this. I can't even find it in myself, in my spare time, to write anything. I can't tell if it's what's happening around us, or what. At the same time, I know that I just kinda have to push through it, otherwise nothing will get done. That'll be everyone. Everyone will be sitting around sad and depressed reading depressing GoFundMe's. That will be everyone's Twitter feed. GoFundMe's for everyone. It kinda is up to the comedic artist, who is aware of it, to kinda keep making things.

I think we get so caught up in all this bad stuff that's happening, we can't laugh. But there are still funny things that happen. Someone falling will always be funny. It doesn't matter how bad of a president Trump is, someone slipping and falling is funny. It's about finding those moments and finding the balance and making sure that's what's presented.

How do you make time for creativity and writing, not because it's work, but because it's just what you want to do?

This is gonna sound kinda backwards, but I think that the more you treat the things that you want to do like work—the things you *want* to accomplish and the things you *want* to get done—the easier it is to push through. If you treat things you want to get done like, "My life will not change unless I finish this thing." I know it sounds like a lot of pressure, but I don't mean it to be that dramatic. It's more about the idea that if you attack something or approach something with that kind of seriousness, then you find yourself more inclined to find the time to get it done.

I used to be someone who would start working on my own thing... I would start working at midnight and do that until 4 AM, go to sleep for a few hours, and then head into work the next day. I just realized now, for whatever reason, my body has switched schedules, and now if I can be in bed by one, I'll wake up at 6:30, or latest seven, and I can just start working then. Again, treating everything as if there is no other time. It's very easy to be like, "I'll get to it later, I'll get to it later." You don't know that.

I watched a video a while ago that essentially said that you can't trust yourself in the future to get anything done, so you have to make yourself do it in the present.

Do you have advice to impart on young, up-and-coming TV or comedy writers?

Yeah, I'll say this: it's actually a two-parter. I think it's important to remember that everyone's journey is different, right? So many people get caught up in being like, "This person did this by this age. This person did this, this, and this, and now they're making their second movie."

First of all, it's important to note that 95 percent of this industry is nepotism. Whether it's overt nepotism or hidden nepotism. The more you're in it, the more you realize, "Oh, this person had many connections to get them to where they are now." It's very important to remember, judging against someone else's journey is absolutely going to drive you crazy, so don't worry about that part of it. The only things you can really control in life are your reactions, you know? Then using that reactionary energy into either being upset or annoyed or frustrated about it, or turning it into physical work, right?

You got to make sure you're always in a mindset of turning thought to energy. I know it sounds a little bit ethereal, but it is so important. I think people say stay positive, and it turns a lot of people off, because when you're starving or you've been working extremely hard and all you want to do is relax for a moment, or you want answers like, "Why isn't this happening?" "Just stay positive." No one wants to hear that. Instead of saying stay positive, the advice I give is, "stay moving." Stay moving forward. If you hear something you don't like that bums you out about someone else's career, write a joke or two, or write an idea for a sketch or write the sketch. Whatever it is.

When the time comes, you want to be ready. Even the physicality of just sitting down and typing something when you're frustrated helps relieve that kinda stuff. The first part of it is don't get sidetracked by another person's success. The second part would be stay moving.

The third part is that it's easy to fall into the trappings of what do people like, or seeing a show that's on the air and being like, "Well, that's what people want, I'm gonna do something like that." Instead, 100 percent of the time a twist on what is personal to you is what's gonna be interesting to people. You want to sell people on a different kind of experience; you don't want to sell them on something they've seen before. Make sure that you're always being true to yourself. There are always ways to shift it, and you'll get notes to make it more accessible, sure. But you still want to, at its core, at its nugget, you want this thing to be you. Just make sure that you're always writing things that feel true and honest and real to you. It doesn't necessarily have to be your exact story. It can be a story that has influenced you or that is completely made up, but at least it's something that is so interesting to you that you feel it in your bones.

I heard you say something in an interview about paying attention to the people whose work you like, their habits and their style. Emulate it, or realize it's the opposite of what you want to do. Can you talk about how you've taken that idea into your own work and collaborations?

Absolutely. I think it's important. Some people will hear that or read that and think you wholly emulate someone's style. But that's impossible, because only what works for you is going to make it right. If you're a night person, waking up at 5:30 in the morning to get stuff done isn't gonna happen. You gotta let that part of it go, but what I will say is that you take the bits and pieces of what you can do or what you know you want to do—the pieces and things you know will make you better—and elevate those and emulate those, implement those in your life.

If you're talking sports, I'm gonna use a gender-neutral person, but this person takes pieces of Sue Bird's game, and then Kyrie Irving's game, and then LeBron James, and then Maya Moore. Then they create and become the best player that they can be. Why wouldn't you do that with anything else, right? You can't take people's style, but you can take those things that are tangible and more objective and implement them, and therefore make them subjective into your own life.

I still do subscribe to that model and motto. Everyday you hope to learn something more.

You and your brother host a podcast together, My Brother's Sneaker. What is your relationship to family and friends, and how do you cultivate those collaborative relationships?

I think that giving and getting notes or whatever or collaborating...people get very hung up on what they think is good, right? If I present an idea and I'm like, "This is the best thing I've thought of," and I tell three people, two of them are like, "It's okay", and one person is like, "Yeah, it's good." You kinda do have to take it with a grain of salt. Maybe they don't share your taste. You also have to understand that they are representative of a greater sample of people, and that if they don't get it, if two of these three people don't get it, maybe it does need some clarification or whatever it is.

As creators, we're all egomaniacs. It's impossible to be good without being an egomaniac. People will take that the wrong way, but truly, the idea that any of us think we're so good at writing or so good at performing or so good at acting or so good at directing, that we think that we're so good that the world needs to see our work, only shows how insane all of us are, you know? I say all that to show that you have to let that part of it go

just a little bit. You need to keep the fire burning long enough that you keep going, but you also need to let it dim just enough to understand that you're not infallible and that you need to listen to people.

Have there ever been moments where you've really had to fight for an idea or joke? How do you pick and choose your battles?

Yeah, it's 100 percent real. Weirdly, there have been scripts I've written where I'm like, "Nothing is or will be better than this." I truly felt that from the bottom of my heart. People will be like, "We don't like it." Then I'll be like, "You are so stupid." I'll be so mad, then, like three months later, I'll be like, "Oh, it wasn't good."

You really do have to think long and hard. People get excited about any idea they have, but the truth of the matter is, if that idea became a TV show or it became a movie and if you never got to do anything else, are you willing to die on this hill for this idea? You have to be smart about the battles you choose, but then also if you do have a good idea and you really know it's good, fight for it. Also, a lot of times, you lose those fights, so be ready to be exhausted all the time, too.

When I worked at *Girls*, the Show Runner, Jenny Conner, straight up told me, "Be ready to ditch any idea at any point." Otherwise, you're just setting yourself up to be disappointed all the time. I've also found that in letting ideas or jokes go, I find the better version of it down the line anyway.

Also, for anybody reading this, clearly, you're looking for some form of advice or guidance or whatever. I promise that you will, within the work you're doing, find the rhythm that works for you. But until you do, just keep pushing. Just keep moving, and I promise it will happen. I'm not even trying to be like a life coach. You just truly must keep going. The rest of it will fall into place. Also, drink a lot of water. Take care of yourself.

Yassir Lester recommends:

[The TV Writer's Workbook by Ellen Sandler](#) is a phenomenal resource for television writers

Pick three TV shows you love. Pick three TV shows you never heard of or know you don't like. List out the things you like and hate about both, and use that as a tool in your next session for writing.

If you're a caffeine person don't go overboard, because you're gonna hit that tipping point where you just become anxious.

Write as many things as you could possibly film on your own. You don't need to write the movie when you can write three things that you can film on your own. It's just as valuable to you and it's like an actual product. It's so hard to get people to sit down and read something, but someone will watch something before reading a blog, you know?

Go see [Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse](#). I think it's probably the most well done, well rounded, for-all-audiences movie made in a very long time.

Name

Yassir Lester

Vocation

Comedian, Writer, Actor

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