

On staying true to your values

Filmmaker, director, and writer Erin O'Connor discusses living with grief, the power of friendship, and collaboration.

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As told to Adrian Inglis, 2371 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Writing](#), [Collaboration](#), [Money](#), [Adversity](#).

You are one of the most creative people. I'm curious how you ended up with filmmaking and writing as channels for your creativity; what initially drew you to film?

The first thing I ever wanted to do was make films. That started with being the oldest of five girls. We spent a lot of time alone with each other in our imaginations and would make truly elaborate productions all the time and then force them upon everyone. And obviously we shot a couple of incredible music videos for Britney Spears songs and all that. That's where the love for coordinating with people, collaborating, and making things began, my sisters. And then eventually I got asked to write a script based off of some photos for a cinematographer. That first experience solidified in a more serious way that filmmaking was what I wanted to do. Because in film, you get to work with every single form, all mediums in one.

What does it feel like when you are really inspired and in a creative flow?

I don't always recognize when I'm in a creative flow, but it can be really big and overwhelming. It feels like the cheesiest thing ever. It's that thing where you're looking up at the leaves, and you're like "Ah, I'm alive." Moments of relief and connection. For me it's about awareness and feeling a part of everything around me—connecting the dots. There are so many different avenues for being inspired. I recently went to an exhibition and there was a 67-minute art film playing. Whenever I felt I had a grasp on what would be coming next something would totally surprise me and I would keep watching. To be compelled to stay with one video or one image while simultaneously having access to all these other places where you could be stimulated is huge. Also, witnessing how other people interpret their environments and then choose to share those interpretations through the way they dress, or the art they make, or stories they tell or don't tell. There's inspiration that is quite direct, and there's inspiration in the really mundane parts of existence.

How do you cultivate imagination, and soften the hardening that happens from simply existing?

I think the main way of softening the blow of the world is friendship. Friendship with friends and also my siblings; relationships make everything worth it. In creative work there are all these huge disconnects because when you decide to pursue your creativity as the thing that's also paying your rent it's immediately transformed and puts you in a position where you are faced head on with capitalism and all of the ways that system negatively impacts you and everyone around you. And then add the reality of the things that are happening all over the world, I think that the insignificance of the things that you're creating is real and is valid. And so the only way for me to stay focused on filmmaking and what I'm doing is to also stay engaged and focused on the conversations I'm having. Taking in new information, learning a lot and then applying that to my decisions and what I give energy to within the world.

It feels important to consider that as a white person making things, I don't have a lot of stories that I "need"

to tell. There are so many films that were made because they needed to be made, and people risked their lives to make them. So the question is always why and who? Why am I doing this, and who am I doing this for? It's something that I ask myself every single day. I am always assessing why, why, why? Looking around the room and asking "Okay, how did I end up here? Who are all these people to me? What's the goal here?" And then going back to humor and using comedy, I think that question of why is often resolved by thinking about the importance of humor because people need to be connected with humor, they need to laugh.

Humor is ubiquitous in your life and work. I think sometimes people interpret comedy as being less deep or serious, which is obviously not true. Can you talk about your relationship to humor?

I think that people who don't respect humor or don't see its importance don't know grief. For me, pain, loss, and grief are directly shaking hands with humor. People who have been through some of the most horrendous things ever also have the most incredible sense of humor and ability to be light and enjoy moments of life that others might miss. I think everything is sincerely, deeply fucked up, so you need laughter. You need moments of release with people that you feel comfortable around, and people that make you feel good. It's really important.

Because, life is grief?

I think so. For me, as you already know, I've lost a sibling, and now very recently my grandma. Those are two very different deaths, and losses, and kinds of grief. And then as we speak there are people who are losing their entire bloodlines and do not have time to grieve. I used to really hate when people would say, "I can't imagine", or "I couldn't imagine going through that" to me about my sibling's death. But thinking about large scale death and loss, I've realized there is a truth to that, I really can't imagine that, how do people do that. Humor helps you manage unimaginable things.

When you're writing a film or concept, do you think about communicating with the audience? Are you trying to create a context for relatability?

Yeah, I think that was a huge reason why I had a sense of humor way before I knew grief. From going to lots of schools, moving around a lot, I was always the new kid. I gained a sense of humor because I was in so many uncomfortable interactions all the time where I was being assessed by groups of people that were already established with each other. That has transferred into the things that I like to make. I like to make things that make people smile at any point. But I actually think if you watch the two films I've made, I don't do a great job of it. They feel pretty self-serious and somber, humor is really hard to evoke in film.

I would challenge that! I think there is humor in your work. There are always moments that diffuse seriousness.

That's true, because the best part and about what I love in writing, is capturing the little mundane details; there's often humor in these details. I want to know what the person was eating when they dumped you. It immediately adds a layer. If someone's eating Fruit Loops while they dumped you, I want to know that. That is real life. I want to tell a story as an example of this. I was visiting my dad's parents, my nanny and papa, and my nanny was choking in the middle of the night and it was really scary, everyone was panicking. My mom went into my nanny's room, and I was sitting there and she was asking my nanny questions, assessing everything, and then leaned over and let out a huge fart. It was so funny and horrible at the same time. Everything was completely fine. But now this is one of the funniest memories. In the moment we were not laughing, but moments after, I'm retelling my mom because she doesn't even remember the fart. I think in writing and in film the things that really resonate are when you allow everyone to be really human. That is a helpful reminder that something can be very scary and intense, and threatening and then your mom farts, and it's actually funny. Those two existing at the same time, which feels like such a contradiction but it's just real.

You put so much care and attention into assembling teams for your projects, what is your relationship to creative collaboration?

I love collaboration and filmmaking is perfect for this because you can collaborate with so many different people at once. And it's also something that I've been repeatedly told to focus on less because of the many highs and

lows that are part of the collaborative process. People contain multitudes, and collaborating with people is extremely challenging. Collaboration requires so much communication, it requires squashing your ego and listening. It requires trying to align your goals all the time. I've definitely struggled with collaboration, but I think it's really important. I care about what my collaborators think of me as a person more than the outcome of what we make. And I don't know if that's a good or bad thing, but it's definitely true to me right now.

It seems that across your personal and creative life, relationships are a top priority. How do you find balance between the individualism that is necessary to achieve commercial success in the Western film world, and prioritizing collectivity?

If you think about directors there is this idea that one person makes this whole huge production happen. This could be true on the level of coming up with a concept and pushing it forward and assembling everyone, but as soon as your team is brought on, those people are deciding the outcome just as much as the director. For example, I think that as a producer deciding where things are being shot and what time of day, this can be a really creative role. The energy on set is really, really important to me. I think that the idea that the position of director is an independent role is a really old-school train of thought, and not something I'm interested in. I think there's some importance to the hierarchy on a film set, but it doesn't make sense to me to say that a project born of this massive collaboration is successful all because of one genius director.

What are some of the biggest challenges that you face working in film? What kind of change do you hope comes from staying true to your values within the system?

A big challenge I face is that working in film is impossible, and it probably makes sense to quit. The obstacles are endless and extend beyond accessing resources such as equipment and money, and each person's positioning in the world. Even with tokenizing and new incentives for affirmative action, the film industry is set up for a small percentage of people to win, it mirrors the system it was built to thrive in. If you haven't made something, you won't be trusted to make something, but how do you compensate people and make something true to your values when you don't have the resources to do things such as paying people for their work? I have relied on my friends and other filmmakers and artists who are in my position to make things, and I think that is the truth for many filmmakers: that we don't get paid for a very long time. I hope the change that comes from staying true to my values is that it makes it easier for other filmmakers to stay true to theirs because new standards get set each time we decide to do it differently. I hope that by giving opportunities to people who haven't made anything yet, and teaching and learning and sometimes failing with them, they also turn around and take chances on people and offer them the experience they need to get access to funding and jobs.

Is there a moment that stands out in your life as an artist when you felt really proud of what you were doing, like you were on the right path?

I probably have lots of moments like that. I don't think it's something that I carry with me all the time, but I actually feel most proud of myself when I say no to things. The impulse is definitely to say yes to everything that comes your way and say yes to everyone that's ever shown interest in you. But it really takes so much energy everytime you say yes and follow through with a project in film. Sometimes you have to say yes, sometimes that's just what's happening. But saying no if you can and filling that space with something else, or staying focused on your own project or someone else's project that you really believe in feels really good.

Is there something that you wish you had been told when you were starting out?

It's hard because two things are coming up and they contradict each other. One is that I went to a panel of all women directors years ago and the advice they gave was to get a job outside film that would accommodate your filmmaking. Most of them were professors. And I was pissed about that. That made me stay in my other job for a lot longer than I wanted to. That kind of reality really freaked me out. And now I am in this position where I am full-time filmmaking and sometimes that feels completely fake. I struggle to say that I'm a filmmaker full time, because it feels like, how can you even say that when it never feels sorted out, you know? But right now where I stand is that you just have to stay focused. And so if that means you get the job that accommodates your filmmaking and you put out a film every few years that you really care about and do a very thorough and

thoughtful job of, I think that's incredible. And if that means that you want to solely focus on film, and you need to make some commercials to do that, that's okay. There are lots of ways to make it happen. The main thing is just to make it happen. Keep making things.

Erin O'Connor recommends:

quitting

nilufarmtl for catering

sound > visual

running jokes

that's when the joke keeps going

Name

Erin O'Connor

Vocation

filmmaker, director, writer

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