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As told to Sammy Maine, 1880 words.

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On embodying your creative genius

Filmmaker Nova Scott-James discusses how to support collaborators, time management and expectations, and reframing of self punishment and disempowerment into something empowering.

When did you realize that you were on the right path?

I knew that I had to make art and films since I was a really small person. I would watch films obsessively as a child, and then I started writing scripts and playing with little digital cameras and shooting stuff. I started taking film courses and training beyond me playing around on my own. I must have been 12 or 13 when I did the first one. When I had been pursuing this thing as a passion, and then was in a course with a teacher and other students, something clicked. Even in the dialogues about story and cinematography, I could engage in this real meaty way. I had all of this to share and I could engage with the work, the other students and the teacher in a deep way. That's when I realized. Those courses culminated in the Future Filmmakers Program at the NYU Tisch School of the Arts, which I did when I was 17. I ended up being an assistant professor in that program just out of college. So, that was a really beautiful, full-circle moment.

How important do you think a formal education like that is for creative practices?

The filmmaker Cheryl Dunye was one of my professors in college. Her film, *The Watermelon Woman*, is such a legendary piece of work, specifically for Black queer cinema. She was fantastic to have as a professor and she brought in Guinevere Turner (*The L Word*, *American Psycho*) to speak to us and I remember asking her, would you recommend I go to film school? Is it worth the time, the money, the investment? Will it hone my craft or strip away the magic and uniqueness of my artistry? Her answer was, 'you'll know if it's right for you or not.' And I understand that now because there isn't one way.

For me, filmmaking training and the class at NYU was so valuable and honed my skills in such an incredible way. I did study film in undergrad as well, but specifically video production and heavy on experimental film and sociology. Beyond college in my twenties, the training that I've done—leadership communication and personal development work—that's been what's really had me refine all of my skills. It's the leadership skills and capacity to guide groups in a way that has people feel taken care of and supports and nurtures their gifts and their genius. Those skills, to me, seem way more important and of value.

What are the most important aspects of collaboration for you? What does it bring to your creativity?

The first thing that comes up is having an understanding of people's values and how those values can be embodied and put into action for them in the collaboration, or for everyone in the collaboration. And really fulfilling upon their values in a practical way feels important. That stands out as one of the most important pieces. Also, being clear on what people want to get for themselves out of the collaboration, what they're in it for, so then that can be honored and fulfilled upon. Those things can be fulfilled, sometimes in really tiny ways that still make all the difference, and sometimes in really huge ways.

How do you know someone is the right person to collaborate with?

Something I think I look for in collaborators is that they're working with an awareness of their gifts, and how their genius is being expressed, and that they're expressing their genius consciously. There are pieces of our work that are challenging for all of us. I think it's important that those are held consciously, too. Not that they're held against anyone in any way, but that we're looking at, okay, what things are more challenging for each person, so that we can get them more support, or just acknowledge

them more once they've done the thing.

You're a filmmaker, innovation doula and community organizer. What does a typical work day look like for you?

I put everything on my calendar, and that really supports me in doing so much. So, that's crucial and supportive to me. I do have multiple projects happening. I mean, really, two main projects, but then within that, there's all these different sub categories. I'm directing this feature length hybrid documentary, *Wild Darlings Sing the Blues, And It's a Song of Freedom*. I'm the director. I'm also a co-producer, so one of a handful of producers. I'm also doing a lot of fundraising for that film. So sometimes there's fundraising calls with donors sprinkled all throughout the day and the week. Then, there's production meetings with my co-producers.

Before a big call, I'll connect with one of my coaches, or one of my colleagues or co-producers, and really generate a space of empowerment around the call. That means saying anything you want to clear out of your space, acknowledging the person you're getting on the phone with and what their values are and whatever work they do in the world, the impact that it has, and what you love about the person. So, sometimes I'll do those before fundraising calls. I also try to dance as much as possible as a way of moving energy.

We can get really stuck sitting down at a computer.

Yes! And we can all be so self punishing. It's so easy to be self-punishing. Like for me, I'll look at the tools I have to shake something off, or reframe it, so that it goes from something that's disempowering to empowering. That doesn't mean that there's not something to solve for but just always fine tuning, reframing and recalibrating to be in a space of freedom and empowerment. That's central to everything that I do.

What are the key things that you consider before you are sure to embark on a new project?

I've been working on the* Wild Darlings* film for almost five years. It's been a journey. There are so many new things that I want to start but for me working with coaches has been a game-changer. One coach is leadership coaching, another coach, Julia Wells, is a business coach and her whole thing is Pussy Based Business, which is amazing. Something that's made a huge difference for me having coaches is them calling me out on starting another project. I cannot tell you how many conversations we have like that. I have so many ideas that I get so excited about and so, I've made a habit to write things down, and then I put them in the imaginary magical cabinet. So, there's an idea for an app, and there's numerous film ideas. There's a number of films I've been taking notes on for the past like five or six years. I'm not necessarily starting new things now. When I started *Wild Darlings*, I actually had set out to raise money to make a short that I wrote that I wanted to direct and co-produce, and that short is called *Natural Rights*. And it's like surrealist, magical realism, but there's a very clear narrative arc. And that's a fun one. And I wanted to make it, and I set out to raise some money to make it. One conversation I had with a woman that's a patron of the arts... I only had a small handful of conversations, but one stood out. And she was really putting her money towards documentaries. I meditate a lot and so, in meditation, and in digesting it, I got open to the idea of making a documentary. And then, shortly thereafter, I think that was spring, and in the fall, my grandmother passed away. And then, my experience was, the month Louise passed away, I received all this information about making *The Wild Darlings *documentary. And I really have it that she offered this to me and it was clear that this is the work that I need to do right now. But I think that particular conversation opened me up to the possibility of making a documentary.

How do you stay passionate about projects when they might be going on for longer than you anticipated?

When I started working on this film, I wanted it to take two years. And I remember, at some point, someone said, 'this really could take you five years.' At the time, I resisted that. It was beautiful, actually, because something settled in my soul where, at a certain point, I didn't care how long it took. I just knew I wanted to serve the work and make this piece of work be really rich and nourishing for people and have its power be full. That was magical, when that feeling of trying to get it done in any particular time frame went away. That created a lot of freedom for me. I've found, too, that the project has really matured in some brilliant ways and I've also matured in some brilliant ways. So, after first being frustrated about time, now I'm really glad it's taken the amount of time that it's taken.

Do you try to nourish your creative self outside of the confines of "work"?

The creative work that I do on my active projects is so fun for me and I kind of love the pressure, in a kinky way. I really do. And so, that works well. There's a feature film that I want to write this year and I thought, what if I write a short version of it first and shoot that? That's around 20 pages. I've been thinking about this feature for around six years and I have all these notes on it. So, I just sat and I wrote 10 pages the other night for like two hours, so that was fun. It's still work but no one's holding me accountable to anything around that and nobody even really knows about it. Also, dance and movement, that, for me, is art making. That's just totally playful. In my spiritual practice, I build altars. It's a really central piece of my practice.

What do you mean when you say "embody your creative genius"?

It's a place of knowing, where the wisdom that you've cultivated—the heart intelligence, and creative intelligence, and emotional intelligence—it's the place where all of those meet and get rooted in some

embodied experience. And then, in the meeting place of all of those, I think we all have these massive research files of embodied wisdom. And so, I feel like it's the place where you go into the file of embodied wisdom and emotional intelligence, and then you pick out what serves the moment, whether that be on a creative project or just in a relationship and in community. We all have this genius catalog of embodied research. It's the stuff of our lives where experience and lessons become these downloads. And they expand us. And, I think, when we're being creative, we're drawing from that.

Nova Scott-James recommends:

Henri Matisse

Persona (Ingmar Bergman, 1966)

Psilocybin

Jazz

Self Inquiry Meditation (particularly silent meditation on the question "Who Am I?" as taught by Sri Ramana Maharshi)

Name

Nova Scott-James

Vocation

filmmaker, community organizer

Fact

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