

On taking the time you need to notice, think, and grow



Writer, artist, and teacher Jenny Odell on giving yourself permission to stay quiet, what it feels like to become a bestselling author, and the mysterious cycles of the creative process.

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As told to Willa Köerner, 3934 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Success](#), [Focus](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

Your book, *How to Do Nothing*, is about resisting the urge to always be productive, and how much we can learn from being still. These ideas were relevant before, but now that we're all quarantined at home, they feel even more relevant. Are there any tactics from your book that you want to reiterate for people now?

There are a couple of things. One is negotiating your relationship to social media. Seeing jokes interspersed with someone whose family member has died, interspersed with very justified outrage, all in this endless stream, creates intense feelings of context collapse, and is obviously not great for one's mental health. So I think just realizing that you do need to step away periodically is something to pay attention to.

In the book I also advocate for a smaller scale of attention, or just a different scale of attention. I realize that not everyone can go outside right now, but as an example, I've been going on the same walk over and over again. I live at the bottom of a hill, and on maybe the fourth or fifth time walking up this hill, I just started wondering, "What's the deal with this hill?" Since then I have been obsessively looking at Google Maps, trying to grasp the shape of this area. I started reading this [Oakland Geology](#) blog and exploring questions like, "Why is there this canyon here?" Or, "Why, when I stand here, can I see this view?" I don't think I would've thought about that stuff otherwise. So it's about paying attention to that—the thing that was right under your nose the whole time—and just really examining it. This type of noticing can be very grounding.

I've had a similar experience of going on the same walk every single day, and getting more and more acquainted with every little part of it. We're all so tethered to these little micro worlds right now.

Yeah. I've been consoling myself, thinking, "Well, if it gets worse and I can't go on these walks..." There's this side entrance to my apartment, and it's basically just ivy back there. But there are a couple of trees and weeds, and you can see into the neighbor's backyard, and there are birds back there, and bugs. So, I don't know, I feel like when I say "scale of attention," I think that can shrink down to become really small.

In your book, it seems like your friendships with birds really help you develop an almost meditative process around observing. Do you have any tips for beginner birdwatchers?

Yeah. Well, one thing I would say is that it's spring, so this is one of the best times to start paying attention to birds, because they're singing, which makes them easier to identify. In terms of starting to identify different birds, I recommend having a bird guide nearby. This is mine right here, *The Sibley Guide*. I've had this for five or six years, and while it's not always easy to see a bird and then be able to look it up, over time as you start to learn more you will get a ballpark idea of what section of the book something might be in.

But I would also say, it doesn't matter if you know what kind of bird you're seeing. For the purposes that we're talking about, I think it's really more about seeing something else that's alive, and is living its life. There's something therapeutic right now about watching something that has the freedom to fly around, and happens to be here in this particular moment.

I really like thinking about a bird's version of time and space. Here [in the Bay Area] we have lots of migratory birds that are passing through. One of my favorite birds is a Townsend's warbler. Most warblers migrate really long distances, so I like to think about, "I'm seeing this bird here, but it's been in Alaska, it's been in all these places that I can't imagine and it's on a totally different schedule, it doesn't know what a week is, it's just living its life according to its own logic." And I can spend time with that and inhabit that for a while.

I like that way of thinking about time. Right now we're all in what feels like a very nebulous expanse of time, so it does seem helpful to think about, for example, animals who hibernate all winter every year, and who don't count the days of that hibernation, they just live through it as another cycle of life.

Yeah. To go back to that Oakland Geology blog, which is really so great, that's another scale of time. Just looking at photos from the 19th century, which is not even that old, everything was totally unrecognizable. All of the hills had been totally deforested, so they were just bare. Now if I look at the hills, they're very forested, and it's easy for me to think that's a holdover from the past. But it's not. So just kind of grabbing hold of that as a concrete moment is, I think, another way of unsticking yourself from this weird temporal trap that we feel like we're in when every day is the same.

Joe, my boyfriend, has been jokingly referring to things before the quarantine as "the before time." I think that if you are experiencing time that way, the present can become kind of frozen and indistinguishable, and the "before time" can also become frozen and indistinguishable. So spending time in a way that reminds you that time moves, and actually no moment is the same as the last one, can be helpful.

You're someone who seems able to jump from "doing nothing" to being extremely productive with your art practice, teaching, and not to mention writing a best-selling book. How do you negotiate all these competing priorities?

From an outside perspective, I probably seem more productive than I am. The part that you're not seeing is that I'm really bad about taking on too much stuff. I frequently have a hard time focusing on one thing at a time. I get really frustrated by that. I end up with tons of unfinished projects. That's honestly something that I will probably be trying to figure out for the rest of my life. Being interested in everything all the time is great for being an artist, it's a generative state of mind, but it's also exhausting and can very easily cause me to just spin out.

I guess I would say that the output that I'm most proud of and I feel is substantive—the project that I did at the dump, or the book are two things that I would think of—I actually see those as almost the flip side of doing nothing. So it wasn't like I had to negotiate a balance between them, they were actually two sides of the same thing, because they were both projects that happened when I had a lot of time to just focus on one thing, and they also both happened after a long period of not doing anything. I have months of journal entries where I'm like, "I'm worried that I'm not producing anything."

But I recognize this pattern now. I'm almost adamant about not producing anything right now because I realize that the stage that I'm in is that I'm just watching. I'm just watching what's happening. I don't have anything to say about it yet. I don't even fully understand the effects on myself. Things are happening in my brain, but I'm just going to leave them there for now, you know what I mean?

Over and over, I've had this experience where I wrote something or I made something, and in retrospect it became very clear that a lot of the material, and just the pathways of thinking involved, were building up long before the "on period" in an "off period." So, I don't want to make it seem like all off time is actually productive. I don't want to frame it that way, but I guess I just feel like there is no such thing as pure productivity, in the sense of how we normally think of productivity. At least for me, everything worthwhile that I've made has always been one side of that two-sided process.

Yeah, I've seen both sides of this right now with people saying, "Stop talking about the quarantine as a time for everyone to have their own residency in their house. This is not a time to be productive," versus people who are like, "I finally have time to just focus on myself. I haven't had this kind of time in years." Everyone is having a different reaction, or is maybe in a different phase. I also think what you said about "not having anything to say about this yet" is worth pointing out, because I feel like these days, we're all almost on the hook to have something to say about everything as soon as it happens.

Yeah. I find there to be something a little bit profane about that, given what's happening right now. Early on I was contacted by a handful of different outlets being like, "Do you want to write about doing nothing in the pandemic?" And I said no. I almost can't even explain why, but it's like, A) I haven't processed anything yet. And, B) I don't have anything to offer. And it would be dishonest of me to pretend that I did.

I also feel like things are clearly getting worse. It's changing so much every day, so anything that I would say is probably not going to age well. You've already seen it go from fun, quirky quarantine things in people's houses to just terror. And in trying to pay attention, but not give into the pressure just to speak or analyze, or have some sort of judgment, I'm definitely feeling the tension or discomfort with not aligning with the way that I might be expected to act.

If you're a writer, or an artist, or someone who makes stuff, it's assumed that you should just always want to do that. If you're invited to do something and you're being given a big platform, or if it's an important moment, it's expected that you should just jump on that. Because of that, it's actually really hard to just take the pause. And if you have the privilege of not needing to do that thing for money or exposure or whatever, just realizing that you have the option not to. And people may not be happy about it, but sometimes it's a matter of principle.

It reminds me of the phrase in your book, where instead of saying "no" to something, you instead say, "I would prefer not to."

The reason I'm obsessed with "I prefer not to" is that when you're asked a question, you may be asked in a way where you think that the only possible answers are yes and no. And "I would prefer not to" is not figured as one of the possible answers, because it's not contained within the question itself. So you have to actually step outside the question. And I just think that that's very related to this idea of obligatory participation. Where you find yourself on social media and the only question you're asking yourself is, "What's my take? Do I agree with this person? Do I disagree?" And there's never a moment where you go, "Do I need to have a take?"

It reminds me that I can just read and absorb, and not have a 100% airtight analysis right now. You know? Or maybe I don't need to respond right now, I can just take it in.

With your book, I'm curious how that actually came together. A lot of people have it in their mind, "I want to write a book, but it's just such a huge daunting project." How did you finally get started on it? Was there a process that actually made it doable for you?

It was honestly a lot of different things. I was invited to give [a talk at Eyeo](#), and the book definitely would not have happened without that initial prompt. And then I also didn't expect that many people to read the transcript of the talk. Adam Greenfield, who wrote [Radical Technologies](#), emailed me out of the blue and said, "I think you should consider making this into a book." Without him, I don't know if I would have even thought about making it into a book. And then there's just circumstantial things, too. I teach, so I have the summer off, which means that I was able to set aside three months to just work on the book.

It's really hard to pinpoint something that made the process doable. I've always written in journals and whatnot, and I was looking at one from maybe 2013. In it, I'm already talking about a lot of stuff that's in the book, just idly thinking about these things. I think anyone who's worked on something where it feels like it's drawing on your entire being knows this sensation, where it feels like you've actually been writing the book for your entire life, and that object ends up being just the little tip of the iceberg that got produced in this period of time. But the references in the book are things that I encountered in undergrad, and even high school.

There are so many references and quotes in the book. While I was reading it, I was trying to imagine how the heck you made sense of it all, just from a logistical standpoint. Did you use a particular software that helped you sort things, or did it just fall into place as you were writing? How did you weave together all these different pieces?

I inadvertently stumbled upon a process in grad school when I was writing a paper. I was having a hard time keeping track of where the quotes were in different books, so I made a Word document—and I still have these original Word documents—that's just the bibliographic information at the top that you would need to put in your footnotes, and then just page numbers and quotes. So for each book, I'd have a document containing all the quotes that I thought I might use for a paper. It just made writing my paper so much easier, so after that, for any book that I read that I thought I might reference in the future, I'd just use that process.

So you have a special Word file for every book you've read that you might one day want to reference?

Yeah. Beyond that, I don't really have a filing system, because if it's on my computer, it feels searchable. If I remember, "Oh I read this book by so-and-so and they said something about X," even if I only remember one word from something they said, I can usually find it.

At this point, my process is to use sticky notes as I read, and then I wait a couple of days before going back and typing up all of the quotes, which is annoying, but it's like doing your taxes. If you do the work at the beginning, everything is a breeze at the end.

And then, I definitely made use of that technique of writing ideas out on note cards and arranging them for a chapter structure. This is especially helpful if you're a visual person, being able to have forms of adjacency that aren't just a list, so you can have things be next to each other in more ways. You just need a big flat space—I've done this on the floor before. You just write all the cards and then move them around until it feels right, and then you use that as your outline. It's like making a mixtape.

Beyond that, my last recommendation is to get a bookstand. It makes it so much easier to type things up, so the book is not always slamming shut on you. Honestly, it's huge. You get your bookstand, and you just put on some good music, and you just get in the book zone and type up all your quotes.

I'm curious to hear how it feels to be a bestselling author. Do you feel like you've officially "made it?" Or does it feel like now you've just set the bar higher for yourself?

It definitely just feels like I set the bar higher for myself. I can't imagine it, but maybe there are people out there who feel like they can just be satisfied. But it's hard for me to believe. I think most people have a little bit of imposter syndrome, which would make that impossible. And I don't know, I don't think I'll ever have a simple relationship to anything that I've made, where I'm just like, "That's good," you know?

I have a very complicated relationship with the book, where I'm glad that I wrote it, and I'm super happy that people have found it useful, and I'm surprised. But I also have so many critiques of my own work and I've also taken a lot of criticism from other people very much to heart. So it just feels like a step. I'm going along some steps and this is one step, and I want the next one to be better.

Do you think that the criticism stands out more to you than the successes?

It depends on what day you would ask me that question. Right now I feel pretty good about the book because I've recently heard from people saying, "This was really helpful to me in this moment," and what better possible thing is there to hear about your work? But then, it's wildly vacillating, honestly. I think it's human nature to remember critiques more clearly than praise. Although I do think that something I've learned how to do in the last year is to separate the critiques that could be useful to me in future work from, not necessarily critiques that aren't meaningful, but ones that aren't really going to help me, or are just mean spirited, of course.

I wrote a piece for the Paris Review a couple months ago about self-reliance. That essay is very much me wrestling with the critique of my book that I do take to heart. I think working through that critique pushed me to a better place. So it was ultimately helpful for me.

Has having a bestselling book changed your life in any way? Do you feel like you're getting more visibility, more money, more attention?

I am not going to be teaching full-time next year. So that's pretty big, just to focus more on writing. And I think that [writing more will be] easier now that I'm no longer someone who is coming out of nowhere trying to get a book deal. I already have one, so that obviously changes things if I want to write another one. So that will be a pretty big material change, because I currently teach as my full-time job, and everything else I do is on the side.

Otherwise, I had to take my email off my website because I was getting too many emails, and now everything goes through my agent or my publicist, which definitely had to happen, and I felt a lot better after I did that. But it also feels really different now, because it means that people can't just email me anymore. I'm actually now very good friends with someone who, before I took my email down, emailed me out of the blue after reading the book. And so sometimes I think about how I'm not hearing from people as much, which of course was the point of taking the email down. But, I don't know, it feels different.

If you could think back to a time when you were struggling, maybe five or 10 years ago, sometime when you were having a hard time knowing what to do, or how to have faith in yourself. What would your advice be to past Jenny?

It's funny because I was just reading something that I wrote six years ago, very much in that struggling state. And I guess my advice would be that it's okay, it's actually maybe a good sign, if you don't feel like you're an expert in something. There is a really great talk by Sara Hendren called "Design for Know-Nothings, Dilettantes and Melancholy Interlopers," where she makes this argument really beautifully, that it's hard to remember when a discipline becomes established, that there was a first person or first group of people who did that. Like the first social worker, for example.

Especially if you work in and around institutions, where you're trying really hard to sell your work or sell the idea of your work, it's really tempting to want to fall very nicely into the groove of some discipline or rhetoric that people understand and can identify. It can be so uncomfortable to be working in an interdisciplinary way that's hard to explain to other people and to yourself, and isn't even really a thing yet. I wish there was a way to tell someone in that position, or me when I was in that position, "No, you're actually on the right path, it just doesn't feel like a path yet. Ironically, that's the evidence that you're doing something interesting."

Jenny Odell recommends:

1. Bird cams on [explore.org](#) (I've been watching an eagle in Iowa for a while), or, if you're in the Bay Area, [the UC Berkeley falcon cam](#), where the babies have just hatched!
2. [Feminist Birding Club](#). Molly Adams started this in NYC and now, luckily for me, there is a Bay Area chapter. The club seeks to make the pastime of birdwatching - largely white, male, and upper-middle-class - more inclusive. Something to keep in mind for when we can be together / out and about again.
3. [Sandspiel](#), a game by Max Bittker. This game reminds me, in the best way, of a part of my 3rd grade class where we got boxes of sand and poured water onto/into it to understand how erosion works. (I have the game open in another tab and since I've written this, some plants mysteriously started growing in my sand.) <br
4. Philip Dray, [There is Power in a Union: The Epic Story of Labor in America](#). I picked this book up a long time ago but didn't start reading it until now, and it's really perfect for the moment, for two reasons. One: it gives context to the issues around worker rights and individual risk that are painfully obvious in the pandemic. Two: It's absorbing, a page-turner with incredible details (e.g. page 404: "Police, suspecting that Carlo Tresca might be involved, rushed immediately to his office, where they grew alarmed by a bulge in his suit coat pocket that turned out to be a sandwich.").

5. "Rec Zone," a video piece from 1986 by the Japanese duo Visual Brains. From the description: "A lazy man chilling in a small, messy apartment discovers the bizarre and recreational power of video recording system-turned-housekeeper."

Name

Jenny Odell

Vocation

Writer, artist, teacher

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