

On reframing our definitions of success



Journalist Rainesford Stauffer discusses the pleasure of conversation and connection, finding pleasure in process, and embracing the never-ending question of creative work.

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As told to Loré Yessuff, 3051 words.

Tags: [Journalism](#), [Writing](#), [Success](#), [Money](#), [Process](#).

What specifically draws you to journalism and nonfiction writing? What is it about those genres that stands out to you over, say, fiction?

I have always loved the conversation part of interviewing and reporting. I love that as a reader. I love the idea that an essay or a journalistic piece can bring different voices or perspectives into conversation with each other, to talk about something that everyone is feeling, or everyone's experiencing, and illuminate the really human element behind a story. I certainly think that's something that spans genres. I don't think that's specific to memoir, or nonfiction, or journalism. I loved the connection piece that I felt when I sat down and listened to someone tell me something that was important to them or when I had to sit down at my desk and think, "This experience I've had that I'm still feeling deeply about, does that say anything of value to anyone else? Does that tell us something? How can I make meaning out of that?"

The meaning/making part and the conversation part are the things that always keep me going back for more. Even if you're talking about a similar topic with someone—it's never the same conversation twice. I think that element of discovery and curiosity has always been the most fulfilling and interesting part of journalism for me.

The meaning-making aspect of writing really cuts deep. You've been writing for about the past six years, right?

I think so. Yeah, six years, seven maybe.

You've been at it for quite a while. Has your reporting approach changed over the years, or do you still follow the method you used when you started?

The core of it is the same. I try to approach all of the reporting I do and conversations I have as just that, conversations because, ultimately, I'm a human being first and a writer/journalist second. I think that approach—which started out very unintentionally and now has become more of an intentional practice—I think the center of it has held. Over time, I think that I've gotten... I was about to say a lot more confident asking questions, and that's just a lie. I've gotten a lot more comfortable with the fact that I can come to a conversation, a project, or an editor and not feel as if I have to have the whole story figured out. As I've gotten further along, the fact that every conversation can surprise you and that there are layers to so many different things I think that's changed how I report and how I research a lot.

I'm a chronic over-reporter and over-researcher. My poor editors! [laughs] I'm always the one having to cut a

bunch of words because I think that there are always so many different directions that you can take a story. I've gotten a lot more intentional about the voices I am uplifting. I think a lot more about how I frame issues and my responsibility as a writer and journalist, not just to my reader but also to the source and the larger conversation. Another part of that, which is not specific to writing, is knowing when to take a step back and think to yourself, "Am I the right person to be telling this story? Who else could I connect to this opportunity? How do I tell stories in a way that is ultimately of service to someone who is not me?"

I'm really struck by what you said about the responsibility that you have to the source and the conversation at large. There's a general set of ethics journalists follow, but in terms of your own beliefs, how did you go about developing that?

That is something that I am constantly trying to interrogate within myself. I think part of it is making it a practice and knowing that, at least for me, the question of responsibility, the question of the values that guide the work, I think that's going to be something that I'm interrogating and learning about the rest of my life. I don't think there will ever be a point where I feel like, "This part of the work is done, and now I've got the guidebook, and I know how to go forward." Honestly, I credit the people who have made time to speak with me in any capacity, whether it's an interview for a reported piece or something really personal for one of the books. I credit editors I've had, who've been willing to have those conversations, and also, the other writers I read. As a reader, I get to think about how someone frames a story or how they talk about their work on social media when they pull back the veil and give you a look at how a story happened.

I think all of those things have helped me think more critically about what my role is and what it should be. It goes back to the idea that, at the end of the day, it has to be about people. As a freelancer, there can sometimes be this big push or sense of urgency to get a story out, to stay on top of the news cycle, to always be coming up with a new idea because you don't want the last thing you wrote to be the literal last thing you wrote. I am trying to figure out how to disconnect from that and remind myself that the point, if we're diluting it down to its simplest form, is to put good things into the world in the company of good people, to do that as often as I can, however I can. Sometimes that means sharing someone else's writing and not my own. Sometimes, that means stepping back when I know I don't have the bandwidth to really do a story justice.

I bumped against these questions a lot while working on the books because my name is on the cover, which has always felt like a lie because so many other people put so much work into both of those projects. It's always felt a little bit slimy to me that there's only one name on a book cover, one name on a byline, and I think about that in regard to sources, too.

Both of the books I've written would not exist without people who made time out of their days and their lives to sit down and talk to me, and then talk to me again, and then answer 15 follow-up questions from fact-checking, and all of these things. One of the big, ethical questions that journalism as a whole is grappling with is: what does it mean when I'm being compensated for my time writing the story, but the source, without whom there would be no story, isn't compensated for theirs? How can we do that differently? I think about those specific questions a lot.

Yeah, I've wondered about that too—it is quite weird.

It's a fine line. I get not paying someone for the exchange of information; I get why we don't do that. I also think it's worth looking closer at how the exchange of information happens, and the power dynamics. I interview a lot of young people in my work, and power dynamics at large are something I think about. We should be able to talk openly about that. I've had people ask me, "Can you pay me for this?" I've had to explain, "No, unfortunately, that could compromise our conversation. That's just not how it works." I think the fact that they're asking is not a bad thing, and I think that if we approach those conversations with more transparency about the how and the why, it also helps people understand what happens behind the scenes. When I was 15 years old, watching something on the news or reading something in a magazine, I had no idea how all of those pieces connected. I feel like not assuming that people know is also a good practice.

Definitely. Speaking of money, can you talk a little bit about how you go about managing money as a freelancer?

What is that like for you? I know it's hellish for many people—me included. How do you go about managing that?

Honestly, this is probably not surprising, but it is something that changes a lot. I should say upfront I try to be really open about this; I've always had another job in addition to my writing. That's looked like all different things, whether it is a full-time job, whether it is other part-time or contract work, there's always been something else. I've been working multiple jobs since I was 15 or 16 years old. Luckily, some of those jobs have involved work that I generally like. I feel very fortunate about that. I think that the challenge for me with freelancing still is always feeling like, is this a real job that people will keep letting me do?

It's so funny because I know people who have built their entire careers around freelancing, and I don't look at their work and go, "Well, that's not a real job." It's something I've internalized that is specific to me. I wonder all the time: Do I take the leap? Do I do this full-time? What does that look like? What does that do to my finances? I've had a really hard time, to be honest with you, letting go of what feels like a lack of security from always having something else.

I say that because I wish that part of it, that self-doubt piece, got talked about more. The questions like: do I have what it takes to "make it," and what does "making it" even mean in a field where people's work is almost notoriously undervalued and underpaid, and people are overworked? There are so many different, intersecting issues of equity and access that fold in on top of that. I didn't learn how to negotiate a rate until probably two years ago. I had no idea that people were doing that. It's just one more example of the grind of capitalism crushing people. We need art, we need journalism, we need the written word. It's such a shame that it's a trade-off for so many people, and it often comes down to, "Can I afford to do the work that I think is important? Can I afford to do the work that I think my community needs, that I think readers need?" It's just the impossible predicament of how something is valued.

What are the most valuable resources for the work that you do?

The most direct, the most valuable resource is other people. I think sources who make time to reach out with their stories and people who are willing to share personal experiences for the books, but I also think about the community of other writers and reporters that I know are some of, if not the most, valuable resources in my career, and definitely one of the most profound and impactful resources in my life.

The level of trust and comradery in those spaces, and the ability to check your gut on something, get advice about something, vent about something. I think that those spaces, those creative communities where everyone is into uplifting everyone else, everyone is into chipping in to make sure that someone has the right editor contact, or if they see an opportunity, they're passing it to that person. It's just been really illuminating to see how important it is not to get sucked into the idea that we're all in it alone and that we have to go at it alone.

Also, fact-checkers—speaking of people that should be paid a lot more, and that we should have a lot more of. Every time I get to work with a great fact-checker, including on both of my books, I learn so much not just about the material that they are checking, but also about how to think about framing, how to think about things way off that specific page, too, if that makes any sense. I think that those are the two big resources that come to mind—and libraries, of course. That might go without saying.

You've written a lot about success and youth and finding yourself in the context of work. I'm wondering how you've come to define success over time and accept that definition of success.

That is such a great question because I was thinking of what we discussed earlier with money. The thing I always think of is all the times that you hear versions of, "It's your passion. Do it for the love of the work." Essentially, it boils down to it being an excuse to exploit people or to underpay them. I think about that in terms of writing, but also all kinds of fields, from teaching and nursing, and this idea that you should be able to get by on passion alone, and if you really loved your work, you wouldn't be thinking about how much money you were making. You wouldn't be thinking about the amount of time spent on something. I think that this relates to success because my benchmark of what it means to be successful, what it means to be ambitious, and what it means

to be passionate about your work has really changed over time.

I don't really think about success now, and I'm not sure I ever really had. I think [when I was younger], it was less about chasing an ideal of success and more about trying to prove myself, to get to a spot where I felt like my work was worthy, and had value, and by extension, honestly, that I had worth, and that I was worthy.

I think a lot of it has been untangling where work begins, where worth ends, and how these things intersect with each other. It would be a lie to say that I don't derive a sense of meaning—to bring us back full circle—and worth from my work. I think the thing that's changed the most about that is it's no longer about reaching an end goal. It's about how I show up, ideally with others, throughout the process. I think my ambition now is to focus a lot more on what feels sustainable and what pushes me to think about something.

I've let go of the idea that I'm ever going to feel like I've done enough. I think enoughness has become something that is defined moment by moment, and slowing down to let myself recognize when something feels like an imaginative moment.

I read something today, I think it was actually an older TCI interview, it was a quote that said something about how, if the day-to-day of your creative practice isn't satisfying in some way, if you don't like the day-to-day, then there's no point working yourself for some elusive end goal such as an award or validation from an institution. I thought that was really meaningful.

I think we do that all the time with stuff, we think when I meet this benchmark, or I do this, or achieve this...I have fallen into that trap over and over and over. It's not that those big things, those dreams that we chase and that we achieve, it's not that they aren't meaningful, or important, or don't hold value; it's just that they aren't the only thing that does. There could also be, at least for me, a lot of meaning in the process, a lot of meaning in the fact that I get to keep doing this, that I get to wake up tomorrow and try again. I've tried to practice focusing on the meaning in that. For a while, I felt very daunted by the idea that it all just keeps going. I've tried to really reframe that in terms of not just my work but my life and instead think: Yes, it all keeps going. Aren't you glad that it does? Aren't you glad there's more?

Rainesford Stauffer Recommends:

You or Someone You Love by Hannah Matthews: Hannah is a writer and abortion doula, and the stories in this book are thoughtful and compassionate and intricate. It's a deeply necessary book given where we are with abortion access and reproductive care, but it's also a gorgeously written one.

Rereading: I love rereading books, usually just a few pages at a time. (I'll die on the hill that reading, listening to, and sharing books you love long after their publication day is good!) Sometimes I do this with multiple books at a time because I find dipping in and out of them to be soothing. Right now, I'm revisiting Tajja Isen's *Some of My Best Friends*, Tessa Miller's *What Doesn't Kill You*, and, funnily enough, *Ella Enchanted*, a book I loved so much as a kid, I reread it until the paperback's cover fell off.

A standby frozen pizza: You can technically swap in any frozen meal here, but for me, it's pizza—the ultimate emergency dinner for when you need to feel like you're having a little treat while expending zero effort to pursue said treat. I have one from Trader Joe's and one from a Kroger brand that are my go-tos. Is there better pizza out there? Of course. But the perk of these is that they are low-effort, low-stakes, and can be consumed while wearing sweatpants, the way the heavens intended.

Randomly phoning a friend: Few things make my day as much as a random call from a friend. While goodness knows I love a schedule or plan, I've come to really appreciate the spontaneity of just thinking of someone, having something to tell them, and calling them. (Even just to leave a voicemail that says hey, no worries on calling back, just thought of you!) I'm trying to do this more.

Too many scented candles: But can you ever have too many, really? You need a variety! I tend to write early in the mornings with one lit. It makes me feel cooler and calmer than I actually am.

Name

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Vocation

writer

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