

On asking what you would do if you felt like you couldn't fail



Multimedia artist and writer Ludwig Hurtado discusses giving yourself permission, learning to say no, and being both practical and philosophical.

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As told to Colleen Hamilton, 2488 words.

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By my count, you're a writer, editor, podcast host, and painter. Is there anything I'm missing?

I would say podcast producer, video producer, director, painter, and DJ. That's just for now, as far as I know. Soon it will be author. One day I hope it will be screenwriter. I've finally written my first pilot of a TV show. So do I get to call myself a screenwriter now or do I need some sort of institutional approval before I can claim that title? That's been a question of my life. Sometimes the *being* has to come before the *doing*—or believing that you can. It's a long list. I think it feels silly sometimes to list them all, but it's important because they're all real.

Have you always been drawn to several mediums and formats?

I've always thought about storytelling in different formats. Since I was a kid I've really been obsessed with being able to communicate things in different languages. I grew up in a Mexican and Bolivian household, and I was raised in my formative years by my Bolivian grandparents who didn't speak great English.

If you had asked me throughout those childhood years what I wanted to be when I grew up, I always said that I wanted to be a translator, because I would always translate for my grandparents. This was during the process of them applying for their American citizenship. After school, my grandpa would pick me up and we would go to the DMV and I would translate things for him. It was something that I never really gave up. In a way, storytelling, journalism and other art making is a form of translation. Right? It's translating an idea into an iteration of that idea, whether through words or through a visual medium.

How do you decide what medium to tell what story?

I have philosophical thoughts as well as practical ones. In journalism, budgets are a huge factor. I may think that a story deserves to be a three-minute digital documentary, photo essay, and podcast, but if you don't have the resources to make that happen, then you can't. So often, stories have to be written because that's most cost-effective.

Other times, if you don't have to think about budget, the story will tell you what it needs. In my documentary practice, I've realized I want to tell stories where you would say to someone, "You just had to be there." There's a certain feeling that a camera over someone's shoulder as they're running through the halls of Congress or through the streets of their city. There's a feeling with the speed, the pace, the texture of the environment that can only really be captured—at least in a way that feels fulfilling to me—by the documentary format.

I have a visual bias. When I started working more in documentary audio and podcast storytelling, I had to get over the fact that I'd be like, "I really want to see this. I really want to show this, but I can't." You have to close your eyes and use your ears and try to see what is special about this place in an auditory way. And then realize, "Okay, the experience of being here is actually something that if I had a camera on, I would have missed the sounds of the cars going by on the street, or the sounds of bees buzzing while we're on this farm." There are other textures that you can find when you're forced to work in a different medium, and that's something that I've learned.

When you get a new idea, what does your curiosity look like? How do you start exploring things?

I am really obsessed with difficult ideas. That is why I started writing in the first place. It felt like the feelings that I was obsessing over could only really be dealt with through essays. As much as I love all these visual art forms, the essay is still the thing that can really untangle the world for me. I always think of my thoughts as headphones in a pocket. You know when you pull out wired headphones and you just need to sit with them and just look at the loops and untangle them? I think that the essay is, to this day, one of the best ways of untangling those headphones in your brain.

The other thing that I just can't stop obsessing over is beauty. I almost feel guilty about that sometimes because I feel like there is something very narcissistic about art or feeling the need to make art. It is sort of saying, "God put this beautiful thing before you, but you just had to be the one to show everyone else." I try my best to be grounded in the fact that I don't make art so that I can be the one with the byline or the one who made it. I make art because I feel compelled to reflect this beauty that I saw and wanted to share. It's like when you eat something so good that you turn to your friend and you're like, "you have to try this."

How do you give yourself permission to embrace and experiment with different formats?

For years, I was scared to call myself a writer because I hadn't been published in any national publications. I had been writing on my Tumblr for years, and knew that I loved writing and knew that one day I dreamt of being a writer, but I didn't know if that dream was realizable. For some reason, that is a deep fear of mine, that someone is going to think that I'm being foolish in my dreaming. And so I've always been very reluctant to claim something for fear that someone else might check me.

The reason that people joke about multi-hyphenates as being silly and unserious is because when you think of the typical model/DJ/actor, it's usually someone who has a lot of privilege and was able to float through life and try things on and see what works. It's really easy to resent that because most of us have to work really hard to make a living. We don't have the luxury of trying all these different things on. We have to pay the rent.

I think that especially straight white dudes with a lot of money have the ability to say, "I'm just going to be an artist." They've never really been told no by society, so they have the bravery to try. And guess what? People sort of listen when you tell them what you are. After a while, they start to just treat you like that thing.

I really encourage all of my artist friends, especially those who come from marginalized backgrounds—and obviously within reason—to try to live as if your parents paid your rent and you weren't afraid of failing because you knew you had a cushion. What would you do?

Once I started thinking that way, I quit a well-paying journalism job. I was worried about my finances, but I also found freelance work along the way. I kept it reasonable. I wasn't fully just, "it will all fall into place." But it did. I was happy freelancing and I felt really creatively fulfilled because I wasn't just doing rote news work, which is what my job had become. It all came down to that core question, "If you felt like you couldn't fail, what would you do?" "If you were a trust fund baby, what would you do?" And then try to do it.

How do you balance your ambitions in each space? How do you navigate wanting to do well in these different iterations of your creative life?

I think you have to be delusional. And I'm glad that I am able to be, because something will just work. If my book is a flop and my films don't go to any festivals, and no one likes any of my art, as long as I was enjoying the making of it, by the time my book is able to flop, I'm already working on some other delusional project. So, hopefully I'm distracted already by something else.

When I'm writing a book proposal to a publisher, in my pitch I'm not writing about my art practice and my sculptural work. I'm writing about my journalism and I'm showing clips of my writing and I'm pulling the things that I've worked on, that I feel proud of, that are relevant to that project.

There's this museum in Denmark called the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. They do a video series called Advice to the Young, where they interview artists and have them give advice to the young. Laurie Anderson's advice was literally: "Be loose." Don't let industry pigeonhole you, because that pigeonholing is strictly for the purpose of their sales, not for your creative fulfillment. So, she said that she really embraced the use of the word "multimedia artist," because suddenly she didn't feel beholden to any one craft, which I think so many of us do.

So, I think that when you're trying to sell—keyword sell—because there's a difference between making and selling, sell strategically. Show that you're really good at that one thing. And maybe there are some avenues where it's valuable to show that you've done multiple things. For me, as I'm selling this book currently to different publishing houses, part of the pitch is that I do have experience with documentary and TV production, because that means I've also been able to think about the book not only in a literary way, but also, what the book looks like in a visual medium, which would bring the publishers more money.

Can you walk me through a typical week?

I've learned to respect myself. I'm not always good at it, but that respect shows up in different ways. I'm really wed to my Google Calendar, and a lot of the appointments in that calendar are with myself, and they are dedicated to a certain thing. The same way you might meet with a collaborator to work on one project and then another collaborator to work on another project.

I try to block out certain 25 to 45 minute periods where I'm working on one thing—if it's 20 minutes that are dedicated to working on a film treatment, and it's these 30 minutes dedicated to working on my book, or these 40 minutes editing a story for the magazine I work at. I think of the person who set that meeting as a real person who I have to show up for and respect the same way I would any outside person.

I think when you start out in the journalism industry specifically, it can be so hard to get your foot in the door, that for a lot of the time, you're just sort of sending out emails that never get a response to so many people, and you're just eager to get any sort of byline, any assignment from anyone that you can. Just to get paid for doing journalism work is so hard, especially at the beginning.

I have struggled to get rid of that inner voice that feels like there's a scarcity of opportunities and I have to take each one that comes my way. I'm finally learning to say no, because I'm respecting myself and my time and thinking more holistically about what work should bring me. And if the assignment isn't going to be fulfilling for me creatively, what is it doing for my broader goals? How is it fulfilling all the parts of me that are seeking fulfillment?

What's a piece of creative advice you wish people had told you at the beginning of your career?

You have to give yourself permission to pursue the things you want to pursue. That doesn't mean that they're easy and that you can snap your fingers and make them come to life. But it took me so long to realize that I had permission to pursue the things that I wanted because it was so ingrained in me from a young age that the things that we're here to do are for the needs of other people.

Also, to anyone pursuing a life of storytelling, I give these words from Octavia Butler. A few years ago, I came across these notes of hers from an archive of just notes that she scribbled throughout her career. And this one

note has always stuck with me, and I turn to it all the time when I'm like, "What is the point and what am I doing?" And she wrote to herself, "Tell stories filled with facts. Make people touch and taste and know. Make people FEEL, FEEL, FEEL." That is what I want to do.

Ludwig Hurtado Recommends:

Return to Oz (1985): Disney's mostly unknown sequel to *The Wizard of Oz* is a dark and eerie departure from the Oz we knew growing up. I've long been obsessed with this movie; from the scary costumes and sets, the oddly political storyline that upends the original film's plot, and more than anything, the story behind its making-of! I strongly recommend reading the film's wiki page.

Pink Noise for sleeping: I don't know who or how but they really made a sound that is White Noise but pink. It feels like being enveloped by monstrous fluffy cotton candy. A very loud quiet, perfect for falling asleep at 6 AM, after a night of dancing.

DJ Earworm's "United State of Pop 2009 (Blame It on the Pop)": I'll always love unironically listening to these songs from when pop music peaked (in my opinion). When the lyrics are mashed together on this mash-up, though, they become this really moving and uplifting chant:

So don't worry, even if the sky is falling down (Down, down)

Gonna be okay when it knocks you down, down, down

So baby don't worry, it's alright, a-alright

When it knocks you down

When you go down, when you go down, down

No need to worry, just get back up

When you're tumbling down, down, down (Down, down)

Ana Mendieta's Silueta series: An iconic body of work by one of my favorite artists. This series was very influential to the way I think about form and materiality.

A group-chat with my neighbors: More than ever, we are all extremely alienated from our communities. Having an open line of communication with the people I share an address with has not only led to the formation of a strong tenant union, but also to some sweet acquaintances.

Name

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Vocation

podcast producer, video producer, director, painter, DJ

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