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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2800 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Mental health, Collaboration, Failure.

On learning to see failure as a gift

Alynda Segarra (Hurray for the Riff Raff) discusses creating your own path, taking control, reframing failure, and learning the value of time.

For this new album, *Life on Earth*, you wanted to challenge yourself as a songwriter, so you changed your environment and worked with a different producer. What do you think were the biggest revelations that appeared during this process?

I learned about how important collaboration is to me in some form. I don't like writing songs in a vacuum. I love the craft of writing songs, but I get a lot of joy from the puzzle pieces and working with another mind and making the songs come to life however the song is asking to go.

I really loved that process with [the producer] Brad Cook, and I felt I learned about what I am capable of. Everybody is capable of way more than they ever imagined when they have the proper support and love. I had this in my mind that you're supposed to hustle and you're supposed to strive and suffer for your art under the worst conditions, or with a lot of struggle and obstacles. But with Brad I felt very safe, supported, and loved. I learned that that gives you so much more energy. I think I really needed to learn that lesson for myself but also just for a viewpoint on humanity.

When you're supported by your community and collaborators you can relax and the process goes better.

There's that relaxation that's so important and I learned a lot about this whole time period where I was making the record and during the early days of the pandemic, I was, for the first time, not running around, touring and booked.

In probably a decade of my life, it was the most still I had been and I learned a lot about what my body was actually feeling and all this tension and anxiety that I was under and it just started this road of being like, "What is this feeling and why do I feel like there's a tiger on the other side of the door all the time?"

I think a lot of people who have experienced traumatic things, we just get used to this low grade or maybe sometimes high anxiety and tension and it's so hard to relax and flow. This was the beginning of me experiencing even moments of that feeling and being like, "Oh my god. Is this what life could be like in my body?" That was a really important lesson. I'm so grateful.

Have you been able to maintain that state of being more with the flow or is it possible to break that pattern?

I think it definitely is. Of course, it's very hard to be alive. We live in a very brutal society, especially for sensitive people, for people who care about the future of the planet; I don't think it's possible to just be zen all the time, but I do think it's possible to break patterns. I got really nerdy about EMDR therapy or just ways to heal neuropathways that go to these immediate reactions, because of traumatic experiences you've had. I definitely think it's possible to heal. You just get more tools in your tool belt and you experience something difficult and you can be like, "I know that that one feeling I had exists, at least." It's so hard to imagine it when you've never experienced it, and then once you have, you can be like, "Okay, I'm going to just try to get back there."

In your NPR conversation with adrienne maree brown, you mentioned that it's important to you as an artist to be honest about not having it all figured out and how important it is to face mystery. Can elaborate on what you meant by mystery and admitting that being brave does not mean that there are no tears or struggles?

I feel like every time I turn on my phone, every time I see what other artists, creatives, or celebrities or whoever, or even just your own friends are putting on the internet is just perfection and having all the answers and there's, especially in the world of healing, so many wannabe gurus and people in politics, who say that they have all the answers. It's so important to admit, "I don't fucking know. I don't know and I'm just trying to figure it out just like everybody else." That makes people feel less alone, and I've had moments where I'm looking at another artist or looking at a celebrity or a spokesperson and been like, "Fuck, I can't even do self-love right." You know, people are just like, "You've just got to love yourself and think that you're the shit" and I'm like, "Damn, I'm also failing at that?"

There's a culture of pushing us to feel like we're always failing. I read a Rumi poem about how failure is actually a gift from the gods, because it teaches you how to be a horse that's ridden by the muses, and you learn to trust it: "I thought we were going that way, now we're going to go this way." You learn how to go on the journey with more trust.

That's what I'm talking about with the mystery, learning how to free fall a little bit and think of these failures or these ideas of coming up short or not being perfect as gifts. When I think about being a musician right now and having an audience I don't ever want to make somebody feel bad about where they're at in their life or their art or their songwriting. I don't have total control over that, but I think that's just something I want to be intentional about.

In this world of chaos and uncertainty, what do you think is the most radical act we can do? And by radical, I mean something you mentioned like trusting in ourselves or navigating or building meaningful relationships.

I think empathy. It sounds so cliché but it's just the most radical act that you could ever have. Not blaming someone for where they're at at the moment. If someone is in a really hard position, take a moment to not blame.

Sometimes I struggle with being like, "I don't want to think anyone is my enemy" but then I feel like that's so naïve and I tousele back and forth being like, "Well, some people just fucking are my enemy." If they spend all their time trying to cause harm and dominate, then they are.

Even then I try to have moments of empathy. Is a really useful tool in a time when we are getting so much more programmed to hate each other. I also think it's a radical act to believe that there is a purpose for your life and what I'm struggling with now is to try to believe that. Trying to know in my gut that small moments are just as sacred and maybe small purposes, like private purposes, are just as sacred and important as big public ones, because I think as a society, we're also really navigating this public and private. It feels like the private doesn't exist and that isn't as important. For example, why don't I think that my relationship with someone in my family is just as much a part of the purpose of my life as having a band or making work that's like celebrated or something.

Is there an idea, practice, or method that you had to let go of in order to move forward artistically?

I am trying to practice understanding what's out of my control. Everybody is talking right now about how hard it is to tour, to be financially profitable to tour, and how it is different from what it used to be. I could think about that all night and be like, "Is this a sign that I shouldn't be doing this anymore?" I don't understand, because it feels like this is what I'm supposed to do with my life. I get very practical and very mythical and mystical at the same time.

I'm trying to learn what is out of my control and decipher what is and really trying to harness trust because I don't know what else to do. And trust could be a lot of things. Sometimes it's in a higher power, which, to me, is the spirit of my grandparents, my ancestors. It can also be trust in my community. I have spent a lot of time putting my heart and soul into a community and, originally, that's the only reason why I wrote songs, it is because I wanted songs for my friends to have with them, as a thank-you for taking care of me. Sometimes it's that. It's like, okay, if the going gets tough and I really need help, financially or some other way, I'm just going to have to trust that my community will be there for me and that they won't let me fall through the cracks.

That's really where I'm at with trust and letting go and also understanding that this music industry is so fucked. It's so corrupt. It'll kill your soul if you let it. For me, I'm deciding how to be reborn. I got to a point of like I'm a fucking tough bitch and you are not going to get me down. If I survived everything I already have, then I'm going to just find a way to make art no matter what. Deciding that you're strong has been really important for me as defining what that strength is. It's like what we talked about with vulnerability is strength, tears are strength. There are moments where I'm just like I don't know if anybody cares about what I make and it feels like this industry is built to exactly the opposite type of work of what I make. But deciding that no one is going to ever, ever, ever make me stop writing songs and making art is a game-changer, to acknowledge that in myself and be like if nobody got you down already then no one will.

Where were you in your life when you wrote the song "Pa'lante"? And for you, has the song evolved or changed now that the world is a different place?

That song has grown with me and it's changed my life in a lot of ways. It took me years to write that song. I had different little pieces and, at first, I had no idea what the song was about. I was on this journey of listening to my ancestors and learning more about Puerto Rico and visiting Puerto Rico on my own and trying to understand what it meant for me to be a Puerto Rican person because I guess I didn't know what that meant for me.

I was living in Nashville at the time, which was really hard for me, it was isolating. Hurricane Maria had happened, but I started writing it before the election. It was like Trump was starting to pop up and be everywhere and it was a joke and then suddenly it wasn't a joke and things were just starting to feel so scary. My grandmother had passed away and suddenly I felt like, "Wow. Now I have these guardian angels" and I was in a very lonely, scary time where I just didn't know what was next.

I also was trying to get away from a music world that became very unsustainable for me emotionally and physically. I wrote "Pa'lante" and when I recorded it, it was the biggest catharsis. When I was listening back, me and the producer Paul Butler, started crying because we were both just like, "We did it. There it is." I kept trying to explain to him, "'You don't understand,' Paul, 'I really think the world is ready for this fucking anthem and it should come from a queer person, it should come from me, I just finally think people are fucking ready.'" He'd be like, "I don't know if they're ready. I don't know what you're talking about but, sure, we'll do it."

When we did it and it felt universal but also like very specific, that felt so important. I finally experienced that feeling of like, "Oh my god. There it is, a really big idea that took years to turn into this four-and-a-half-minute moment in time." Then it gets addictive to be like, "Damn, how do I do that again with another huge topic?" It's really grown with me, and now when I play around the world, people want to hear that song. People all over the world really relate to it. I'm like, if my grandfather if my great-grandmother could only see this moment of people really relating to the Puerto Rican struggle, to Puerto Rican liberation and seeing themselves and their people's struggle in it, I just think they would be really so ecstatic.

What is something you wish you knew 10 years ago?

To recognize that your friends are my family. I've been thinking a lot about time. The new work that I'm making is a lot about memory and about my experience with time. For so long I felt like I've been doing time, in a way that isn't how it works. I don't know how else to explain it, but I always thought I could go back and do it again. I always thought, "Well, I'm going to leave home and I won't be able to spend all this time with my aunt," who raised me but, "I'll be able to come back."

I didn't get that, no, this is a fleeting moment and, of course, I don't regret a lot of the things I've done, but I do feel like I wish I understood that sacred moments with my friends, that they really are fleeting and that you really don't get them again. That's something that older people always try to tell you when you're young, but when you're young time feels so boundless and so endless. I wish I was really told these things that you're doing for your career right now, of course, they're important, but the real gold is these moments with your friends and your family.

Alynda Segarra Recommends:

I love skullcap. I think it's a nervine or maybe it's an adaptogen. I'm not an herbalist but I love herbs. It's been a really helpful herb for me, that just is good for the nervous system. I'm sure it's also good for your immune system, so I'm putting it out there. It has a cool metal name.

I just finished this book called Man's Search For Meaning by Viktor Frankl, and it is exactly what I needed to read right now. He was a psychiatrist and I think a brain surgeon, who survived the Holocaust. He just really believed in the human's belief that there was a purpose to their life, and how it's all about the will to meaning as opposed to other ideas of will to power or will to pleasure. He's like, "No, it's all about the will to meaning." I have gotten so much from Viktor Frankl. He's one of my favorite philosophers.

I'm really getting into perfume, and I think this is really fun and joyful. Perfume has become a pleasure of mine. I just love scent and I think it's just fun and it makes me feel like I'm living a beautiful life. I just went to a perfumery in Paris when I was there. So fun. It was like, "Oh my god, I'm in this old-timey gorgeous place and I'm going to buy lichen perfume."

I think another thing that I'm really taking a lot of joy in is watching the stuff on the Criterion Collection. I just went for it, I bought the subscription, and now I'm bouncing around being like, "Let's watch a Godard film because RIP Godard. He just passed away" or, "Let's dive into some other part of the world and the experimental film that they're making."

A lot of people are talking about it but this new Plains album by my friend Katie Crutchfield and Jess Williamson. I just think it's like so classic and incredible. I just feel like you put it on this album, and we're always going to remember the temperature in the room and the season and it's just one of those albums that I think is going to grow with all of us. They're just incredible songs, which is such a dying art form and I love when I'm like, "Real songs."

Name

Alynda Segarra

Vocation

singer, songwriter, musician

Fact

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