

On allowing yourself to do one thing at a time



Olympian and artist Alexi Pappas on making space for yourself, committing to your goals, and managing multiple creative identities.

January 23, 2024 -

As told to Abby Carney, 2811 words.

Tags: [Sports](#), [Writing](#), [Acting](#), [Film](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Identity](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Success](#).

You are all of these things: runner, writer, actor, filmmaker, director. How do you make it all flow?

On the outside it looks like many things at once, but I'm only ever doing one thing at a time. Before I went to the [Olympics](#), I was very thoughtful about keeping my athletic and creative identities separate, because I wanted to earn the sort of credential in running [being an objective success as a professional athlete]. Before I moved to LA, before [South By](#), before we premiered [Olympic Dreams](#) [my second film], my priority was athletics and any leftover time was spent in the creative worlds. Recently, the creative stuff has taken priority.

But the processes are similar. You show up, and have the things that make you most likely to be able to try your best—your uniform and your tools, and whatever your environment is—even if the work isn't always your best. It's having to learn how to take on and put on a different hat and be really present with where you are. I love the calmness of being exactly where I'm meant to be, and I try to create that in my life at all times where I'm allowed to sit fully into the chair that I'm in.

It can be hard though. If you're writing something and you see your emails come up and those things feel more timely, you'll get drawn away. So I try to protect that time. If I'm writing a big thing like a play or book, I'll usually do a training camp, like I do before a big race, where I try to set aside all the other creative and athletic work to just do that creative thing. I did that for [Bravey](#), and then the [young readers book](#). I went to Joshua Tree and just wrote for two weeks. If I can give myself the ability to spread out in something, it will be much better. I need to sit for a few hours to get anything decent done in a creative writing way. As an artist, more and more, I don't want to wear every hat.

You do so many things and so many types of things. How do you plot out your calendar year?

I never plan more than a year in advance, because so much changes that if I did, I'd probably limit myself, or it'd be too overwhelming. My [North Stars](#) used to be more tangible. They used to be the Olympics, make a movie, write a book. They've become more broad now: I want to find out [what my identity is in athletics](#) without competing hard, but I'm still in the sport. That was kind of what this year was. I'm exploring [guiding](#), I'm doing [ultras](#). I'm not training in a serious way, and I'll evaluate at the end of the year—how sustainable is this? How fun was this?

Creatively, I had a general goal to move toward television and see what that was all about. There are a lot of television projects, and you can't control the other side of the tennis court, but generally, anytime the ball's in my court with regards to the creative arts, I'm trying to hit the ball back. I just want to see how long I can stay in the game.

But the world will also show you where momentum might be for you and where you might be able to be additive. I want to find that home like I had on an athletic team, but in the arts, so I'm trying to figure out—where could I be useful? I'm embracing being one of the athletes in Hollywood. I used to be like, no way, I'm just a creative. Now I'm getting phone calls from big producers that are like, "We want a show set in the ultra running world. We want a show about women's sports in high school." And I know that world; I'm not as ashamed of being a creative person in that specific category anymore. Now I'm into it.

In your book *Bravey*, you wrote of how it used to chafe that people would refer to you as an athlete-turned-artist when you've always been both. Now people in the creative field are asking you to do projects about running, where you have this deep well of knowledge. How do you feel about that identity crossover?

There are so many untold stories set in the athletic world, and it's such a good stage for falling down, getting back up, relationships, identity. It's a world, and one that comes very naturally to me. If I want to learn a new craft or genre, like horror, it would be wise for me to do it in the athletic world, because I know about sports. So that's a good way to grow as an artist, to be rooted in some things you know, and some things you don't. You can fictionalize and blend fiction with reality in a way where it's not documentary.

Fictionalizing the Olympics is something I did with *Olympic Dreams*, and now I'm continuing it with some television and film projects. No one's ever been able to do it before because the Olympics are so protective, and they want to make sure that it's represented well. I have the rings tattooed on my arm! I feel like I have these keys, and I both want to use them, and I want to do a good job with them. So it feels like now it's not a shortcut, it's a challenge that I'm appropriately suited to take on.

You're an expert community builder, you have all these Braveys and people in the running world. What's it been like finding your place and your teammates in the art world?

It's a process. I feel like I'm still finding it... um can I run to the bathroom?

Of course!

This [hesitating to ask] is an example of this voice in my head that says, "Don't do that. Artists don't do that." I think we all have caterpillar thoughts—thoughts that we used to have before becoming a butterfly. Even if we've grown and evolved, we can still know what we would have thought, but we can remind ourselves, "It's okay." You can evolve, but we have to acknowledge that we're always going to have these caterpillar thoughts for whatever reason, at whatever time. I'm so grateful to feel comfortable enough with you to tell you I had to pee because an old me would have been like, "Do not say this thing."

But [to your original question] when you make friends in the arts, and you come from different backgrounds, you know different facts. You had totally different lives, but you have a similar vibration. With a lot of my peers and friends in athletics, we knew a lot of the same facts, but sometimes I just feel "different." [Whereas] I get along with people in the artistic world who vibrate on the same level as me, even if they have no idea how many miles are in a marathon. It's a different kind of friendship than you might have had in another siloed world that you came up in.

You've said that you're endlessly curious about acting. Can you tell me more about that curiosity and how you explore it within roles?

In acting, you get to be a real teammate, and I just try to be the best teammate I can. If you're in a scene with anybody else, you're meant to help them be more themselves or give them something to reflect off of, and that's really satisfying. What's hardest for me is also being a public figure, someone who gives speeches. There's a whole different way to present yourself when you're doing those sorts of things and when you're trying to be natural in a scene. I find auditioning on camera to be very hard because most often when I'm on a cell phone filming, it's more as an athletic ambassador to something, giving a PSA.

Acting is fun. It's something that I never want to need. Because you do need someone to ask you to step into those roles. I want the opportunity to act, but I also know that the best way is to create my own opportunities, because then you don't have to need it, and you don't have to rely on other people or sit in wish land. Wish land is such a weird place to sit in for anything.

You struggled with depression after the Olympics. Did that make you nervous moving forward about having peak moments and big successes?

No, because I had no preparation to deal with it at the Olympics. Now I'm aware that a peak in your life is not complete until you come down the mountain. I was not prepared to acknowledge that half of the mountain is actually coming down; that there's a time after that is a part of the peak itself. I have a mentor who told me that depression is a disease of depletion. They said it's a nervous system overload in the form that I had, which is a situational depression. So I have to be better equipped to pause when my nervous system is overloaded.

I was told that we have the most nerves in our face, stomach, hands, and feet. And if we notice a shift in any of those areas, that's the first sign that our nervous system is overloaded. So now I'm learning to pause when I have a canker sore or an eye twitch. I remember my depression, I had a canker sore for the weeks leading up to it, and I did nothing about it because I didn't know. Now I have so much more awareness. And then to build in the decompression time after, to not answer what's next. Now I'm not afraid of the moment after because I'm so aware that it exists and that it's a chapter and that I have to respect it. And if I don't, then I'm going to fall into that hole again. But if I do fall into the hole again, I know what to do then.

How do you balance your ambition with your ability to get moony over your accomplishments no matter what?

How do you decide how proud of yourself to be? That comes back to the same North Star question of—what was your goal going in? Except for the Olympics, every other race I ran leading up to it had a very specific goal. It was like, this race is to practice the warm up, this race is to practice the middle five laps. I literally had to go to a race to practice my whole warmup routine, and then did it again, because I hadn't practiced proper fueling and was pooping my pants during races. In an ideal world, everything comes together, but everything can't come together every single interval leading up to the big one. And if you don't practice the elements leading up to the big thing, it won't all come together. It's so important to know where your growth can happen and that you can't take shortcuts to it. So if there's a gap in your knowledge or experience, it's okay to be where you are and to just acknowledge the growth.

Are there times in the past when you didn't have a good handle on that mindset?

I used to feel like I would only get one chance at everything in life, and that was so much pressure. That shifted after depression, and after the Olympics. To accomplish something that is objectively a peak of a world and to have overcome something big, it feels like I'm in some sort of second life. No one is demanding that I do any of the things that I'm doing. I'm creating all this chaos. I think it's important to give yourself the chance to be fully committed to something. That was my mindset until now. I was very committed to that goal, and now I'm very committed to being myself. I don't know who that person is fully yet; we all can't ever fully know.

A lot of my life up until this point was nurture. Nature—those weird impulses you have, which you're not always allowed to explore—is I think the next chapter. When I was running for Nike, I couldn't dance through a marathon. That was not okay with that structure that was supporting me. But now I'm with companies where I can do whatever I want, and they're okay with it. Creatively, it's feeling more like exactly what I am might be okay; now I feel that it's welcomed.

How have you been exploring becoming the truest, most expressive version of yourself?

I never used to stay up late and now I've started going to raves—just to receive music and be in an environment where I can be bathed in really good music and move however I want to move. You don't have to be anybody. They're very accepting environments where people aren't watching you. I feel like I always need to balance some of the

attention on me—I want to be in a community, but be super weird and nobody even can see me because I’m just nobody. It doesn’t matter.

Sometimes your day will just run off the edge, like an infinity pool, and you can’t plan it, because you don’t know when you’re going to be inspired. You can stay up all night, one night a week, and you will survive. That’s something I realized recently, because as an athlete, it was new. Sometimes I stay up all night talking to someone, or I just make stuff. I’m trying to give myself a little bit of laxness for discovery there.

Alexi Pappas Recommends:

The first thing I recommend, **if you are trying to exercise regularly, is to call it “practice,” even if you are just meeting yourself.** Practice feels more real and official, and makes it more inevitable that you’ll actually do it. Set a time for your practice and go climb that mountain or walk that dog or lift those weights or whatever makes you sweaty and happy – I wish you all that you wish for yourself.

The second thing I recommend is **a spoonful of olive oil every morning.** I am no doctor but I am Greek and a believer that olive oil is magical. My mentor/physio told me that a spoonful of olive oil before coffee helps slow caffeine absorption, increase nutrient absorption, and most importantly, helps coat your body and protect your nervous system. The goal is to eventually build up to a whole shot of olive oil. Invest in good olive oil... imagine that olive oil is face cream for your insides (and your food).

The third thing I recommend is to **spend more time around babies, animals, and nature, or at least one of those,** especially if you are someone who has trouble getting out of your own head or understanding how to be uninhibitedly present. Babies are awesome because they let themselves come in and out of moods without imposing the secondary judgment on themselves of whether or not they’ve stewed long enough in their sadness to be happy again. They just see an amusing thing and become happy. It isn’t always that easy to change our emotions or mood, though, which is why nature is great. Nature is an emotional battery. When you don’t feel yourself, going to a nature place where you once did feel yourself can really help. It’s like muscle memory for the mind. If you’d rather feel a sense of newness, though, go somewhere new. And animals. Animals are magical creatures walking this earth and anything that can make a toy out of a paper bag can probably make us feel good and connected too.

The fourth thing I recommend is **if you ever want to connect with other people and especially with a teenager, try to do an activity with them,** such as making beaded necklaces together. Jay Duplass taught me this phrase called “parallel play,” which basically just says that humans have the best interactions and easier time with tough conversations when they’re playing together. Playing can be anything from cooking to walking to driving to gardening to shopping—anything besides just staring at one another trying to talk. It helps with teenagers and everyone since there is also a teenager in all of us.

The fifth thing I recommend is to **read Joyce Carol Oates’ *Wild Nights!***

Name

Alexi Pappas

Vocation

Olympic athlete, author, filmmaker, actor

□