

On operating from a loving space

Poet, actor, and activist Donté Clark on the origins of his poetry practice, the internal and external pressures that get in the way of our work, and what it means to operate out of love instead of fear.

January 11, 2023 -

As told to Ambrose Mary Gallagher, 2938 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Adversity](#), [Independence](#).

You do a wide variety of things—acting, poetry, playwriting. Do you focus on one area at once, or do it all at the same time?

I do it all at the same time. When I'm really focused on writing, they all help each other. If I'm focusing on writing, like a story or a play, those ideas help me think of characters, and when I think of characters, it makes me dive deep into their motivation, what they may be going through. Those details allow for me to think poetically and try to put certain words into a picture format. That way when I say the poem, you can see the images of what I'm saying. When I put it to music, it makes me rhyme at a certain rhythm and it makes my writing more intricate and deeper. When I'm *really* focused on writing, I love to do all of them at the same time, because if I focus on one thing, sometimes I can get stuck.

Where did that impulse to start making art come from for you?

Pain. Just experiencing loneliness and feeling misunderstood, abandoned, or overlooked made me draw inwards. Then from there, it was all of these thoughts that I needed to write out. I didn't know that writing was therapeutic. It's this new term now, new thing. But for me, it was for real. No one was listening, so I just write down my ideas, write down my thoughts in my journal. It was just about having that activity to do for myself and knowing, "I'm going to write."

While I was in school, I would just write... From there, it was like, "If I'm really good at this, I can get paid," and I didn't want to limit myself to like, "I'm a rapper," or, "I'm a poet." It was like, "If I could just focus on being a good writer, I could write anything." I could do magazines. I could do newspapers. I could do reviews. I could do people's websites, mission statements, whatever it is that you might need help with. If I could just focus on being a lover of putting words together, I could do anything. There is no age limit for when my career could start or stop. Whenever I choose to write, I can do it.

So it started from pain, and then from there, just realizing I had a talent for it. A perspective like mine is something I don't hear that often in storytelling, poetry, or music. It's not just about being a good writer, but also having a strong perspective. Having a perspective is also profitable. It brings in the audience.

What do you see as your own unique perspective?

I'm always looking at the soul of the matter. For example, I could easily say, "Police brutality. We need to fight against that." But if I instead take the perspective, "How many bodies have that police officer's boots stepped over? How much blood is underneath the creases of those boots?" and just told it from that perspective—depending on how deep I want to go into that. It could be a poem, a song, or a play, just talking about it from

the perspective of the boots—every day when he puts on his boots, what’s going on in his house when he leaves, and what does he bring back into his house? From looking at the boots, it could probably put you into the mind of the person wearing them.

Everything around us is a part of the story, and if you can train your eyes and ears to see life from that vantage point, it’ll take you in deeper into the story.

When did you make the transition from doing this for yourself therapeutically to sharing it with other people?

I was writing for myself from the ages of around 12 to 17. Once I shared my first poem and I saw how people responded to it, it was like, “So I’m not the only one going through this? Why y’all be acting like y’all not then?” That made me mad, because it was like, “Y’all see me acting out, and y’all called me bad, but the whole time, you feel the same way that I feel? I just don’t know how to contain it, or I don’t want to contain this. I want to get this out of me. Y’all have learned how to act like it’s not there.”

So it made me empathetic to be like: All right, you can’t take what people do personally because you just never know what they’re going through. Though it may be annoying that they behave in a very egotistic or insensitive manner, that’s about hurt.

I think sometimes that’s a burden, because when I’m just focusing on me, I feel like I’m distancing myself from other people. But when I write something, I think about other people. Then I can lose myself and try to write about everybody else’s problems. So it’s like trying to find that medium again of being knowledgeable of what’s going on with other folks and then, how is that affecting me?

What are your strategies to balance that?

Sometimes I try to consume everything that’s going on in the world, and then I just fall back and just allow time and space to be distant. Then whatever emerges, I just try to capture that. Just trusting that if my mind is really a computer, there’s so much data that I haven’t processed. It’s just on overload. So it’s like, “All right. Stop taking in so much, and sit and just be.” Then when things start emerging, intentionally put yourself in a zone to just grab it. Boom. Write it.

How do you get in that zone?

Oftentimes, there has to be some form of adversity that I’m going through. I have to have my back against the wall. This is life or death... It’s crazy, I love to write, but I don’t just sit and spend hours writing. But when I’m going through something, I feel motivated, and I just feel like I’ve got to get this out. It makes me want to perform. It makes me want to write something that can really articulate what I’m going through so I can deliver it in a way that the energy... where you can’t compare it to anything.

So unfortunately, it takes a lot of mistakes, a lot of heartbreaks, a lot of disappointments, a lot of feeling like, “Dang. Ain’t nobody got me? All right. It’s good. I’m fixing to go crazy. I’m going to just write. I’m just going to focus...”

Do you feel like, right now, you’re in a zone where you’re writing a lot or are you in more of a falling back period?

I think I’m in a falling back period now so I can eventually get into a writing zone. I’m working on two or three books. And not because I have to. I just feel like I need to. What’s been stopping me is fear. It’s like, “Man, my writing is not good enough,” or, “Don’t nobody care. Why you doing this? Blah, blah, blah.” It’s like, “Man, you just got to do it for you. Don’t worry about selling it. You never really cared about that.” It’s always been about the process of taking words and experiences and crafting them in a way that’s undeniable. This is powerful, period. Just getting back to the love of it, back to the challenge of, “How can I think about this experience and really process it?”

You're talking about feeling these pressures on the art--where are those pressures coming from?

Mostly me. I feel like people always like what I've written or what I've presented. I haven't really had too many people tell me, "I don't like this." Sometimes there would be those certain people, when you tell them you want to do something, they start bringing up so many different ways on how you should do it, instead of just acknowledging like, "That's dope. That's good. Where do you want it to go?" and, "Have you thought about how you're going to get there, and where can I support you on getting there?"

So those are the pressures. Like, if I do this, there's going to be somebody that's going to tell me it could have been better. I know it could always be better. I don't want to hear that. Just either help me make it better, or just wait until I get better. It's a part of being in the process. If you can't help me, then just stand over there and just support so I can use these resources to get better on my own.

At the end of the day, the pressure would mostly be on me. When I allow other people's opinions into my thought process, it always throws me off track. When I focus on, "This is what I'm doing, and I'm going to focus on my formula and my process of how to do it," I was always ahead of everybody around me, because I know where I'm going and I know why I'm doing it. So none of your opinions, whether positive or negative, will affect me because I already know where I'm at.

With that in mind, how do you handle social media or digital spaces, especially when you're creating things? You're talking about seeing other people's highlights and all the best things that they're doing. Is that helpful when you write to motivate you, or do you try and stay away?

Honestly, I feel like before I got on social media, I was on a roll. I only saw the people I wanted to see. If I wanted to hear a particular artist, I went on YouTube or I Googled some of their stuff. When you start looking at what they're doing on social media, it can look like I should be doing that in order to get a reaction...

Right now, it's just about realizing, "Okay. The more you are on here just pretty much watching other people push their highlights, you will then feel like you need more highlights in order to feel successful." My highlights aren't the same as what you may consider a highlight.

My highlight is something like getting on the Muni [municipal transit] for the first time and coming to a place I've never been to talk with somebody. My highlight is taking a phone call from a lawyer, going up in court, and then having a jury look at this case differently because I'm in the room, with no college degree, with no professional training, just my years of experience and things that I think about from different perspectives. I could go into a courtroom and give a testimony that can literally change how much time this person may be facing. I can't Instagram that. I can't be in court like, "Look. I got the jury in here crying at my testimony. The judge is trying to crack jokes with me. He's trying to throw me a curve ball. I responded sarcastically, and then everybody in the courtroom lightened up with laughter."

Those are highlights for me. To be a person that's like, that same judge that convicted my pops and my brother, I'm up in here testifying, and I just got this young man freed based off my testimony. That's a highlight, but I don't have to put that on a social platform. If I did and it doesn't get a lot of likes, then what? It'd make you feel like don't nobody care about what I'm doing. You just saved somebody's life, bro. No amount of likes could really amount up to the things that you did or said today, something that literally probably saved somebody's life from taking their own, or taking somebody else's. So you can't really capture that moment all the time.

When I disconnect and I live, I can't be stopped, because I don't really have any outside distractions of trying to please somebody by posting something that's cool to get likes or comments or followers. When I'm not on there and I'm just living, I can't be stopped. All I have is my thoughts. Then it's like, "Execute. What are you waiting on?"

Social media is such a big promotional thing for artists. I think the artists are often asked to give a lot of their personal selves on social media in order to promote things. How do you deal with that promotional business side of making art?

I realized what I really want to say and what I have to offer, and that I don't want to put it on a platform where people can easily take it as a gimmick or can view it as you trying to go viral. If I was intentional about being a business, like, "I need to get a logo, promote this, promote my shows," it definitely could help. I feel like, to compensate for that, if I'm not seen on the socials, I try to be seen more in the physical. Whether that means I have to do a lot of guest appearances, if I have to put on a lot of my own shows, if I have to find a location where I feel comfortable to just be there consistently so people can come to that, that is what I do. I feel like more people seeing me in a physical space is my strong suit, because I don't really like posting a lot. I'd rather have conversations or be in front of you in real time.

Other than working at the youth center, are there any other jobs you work outside of the artistic area? If so, how do you keep your creative side fed while you're doing other types of work?

Like I mentioned, there is the court work that I do. Lawyers, public defenders, or defense attorneys will call me and ask me to come and speak on behalf of their client, mostly in Richmond, due to the laws that they have with categorizing certain activities as gang behavior. That feeds my creative side because it pisses me off.

You may have a theory that the legal system is racist towards Black people. It's like, "Yes. Historically, there were some misfortunes, but we have progressed as a country." You hear that, but when I enter into this courtroom and I'm looking at these laws that y'all keep on trying to say is a law, but I only see it implemented on a particular community, then that gives me that creative insight of like: All right. How can you articulate this idea of, "Yes, it's the law, but you *know* that you are only enforcing this on a particular group of people, and that's how you're getting away with racism. You legalize things that you know are only going to affect a certain group of people, and then you penalize them for it." So I just start looking at things like that, and it's like, "All right. Artistically, how can I apply this to my poetry, my music, or plays that I write?"

What keeps you motivated to keep moving and creating?

The Most High keeps waking me up every day. Some days, I'd be really feeling like I don't want to be here. I'd just be tired of fighting... So some days, I'm like, "I don't even want to be here, bro. I don't even care no more. Whatever." Then I always get a reminder. The next day I wake up, it's like the Most High saying: "Don't give up, homie. I ain't give up on you. I woke you up today because you need to focus. Now that you know what's out there, quit allowing yourself to be in certain environments that are going to drain your energy. You got to focus." That motivates me every day. Some days I'd be sad and depressed, and then the other days when I really think, "Ain't nobody touching me." You got to keep going.

Any other questions you'd wish I'd asked? Things you want to talk about?

Last thing I'll say is, every activity is inspired by one or two things. It's fear or love, period. Fear is: I want to leave a legacy, so I got to work hard now. But it's like, are you afraid that you are insignificant now and that just being present is not good enough? Love is: I'm accepting today. I don't care about what tomorrow is. Yesterday happened. If I accept today and be the best that I can today, each day that I have that opportunity to be my best, *that* will be my legacy. I don't have to compete with anyone. This is who I am. This is what I can do. This is what I choose to do with my time here today. So whatever career, whatever activity that you're doing; if it's not feeding the spirit, it's taking away from it.

Donté Clark Recommends:

1. Eat plants, seeded fruit, and drink a gallon of water a day
2. Listen to Lauryn Hill's unplugged album
3. Sleep outside in the sun
4. Go to sleep no later than 90 minutes after sunset
5. Humble yourself, you are not your own

Name

Donté Clark

Vocation

Spoken-word poet, Arts organizer, Actor, Writer

□