

On learning to prioritize your curiosity and joy



Poet and professor Donika Kelly discusses the therapeutic nature of writing, having a haphazard process that works, learning the rules and breaking them when you need to, and following your interests.

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As told to Resham Mantri, 2614 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Education](#), [Process](#), [Mental health](#), [Mentorship](#), [Identity](#).

Why is undergrad your favorite level to teach?

Because they're still in a space where it's easier for them to receive criticism, and it's easier to frame the work that they're doing as practice. Graduate students, in my experience, are situated in a space of needing to feel like what they're doing is professional and that it's leading to a product. With undergrads, that's just not a vibe.

Having students who are genderqueer, who are non-binary, who are from many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds has encouraged me to be softer in my approach to the world.

Young people are great at thinking and being flexible in their thinking. As we get older, our ideas about how things work or should work become more calcified, and folks who haven't had things calcify yet, it can be much more exciting to talk through things with them.

You once said: "... I don't believe in perfection, only process. The book, the making of it, was a process. The experience it charts, another process. The person I am now is yet another." Is that still the way you approach your work? Is it how you approached the book that you are working on which is coming out soon?

I do believe in the process of doing the work. That getting to a place where I can write a poem, that's a process, its own process. When I was writing the poems for the new book, many things were happening. My marriage was ending, I had moved to a very cold place. Cold in lots of different ways, both in terms of the weather, but just the vibe, it was a sad town. People weren't connected to each other, and I had to do a lot of work to stay present with my feelings. I found a therapist who was wonderful, not exactly the kind of person who I would expect to work well with, but she was great, and she was one of the few people who I hugged.

I was writing about having been sexually abused as a child. It was hard to write that in a place that was so distant in many different ways, and the work I did with my therapist was really grounding. It was the work that made it possible for me to acknowledge this was work I did not want to do. I'd been in therapy, I think, at that point, for probably like 15 years pretty consistently, with some gaps, maybe a six month gap or a one year gap here and there, but that was rare.

It felt like it was a video game where you get through all the levels and then it's like the final level, and it's the big monster. Especially the poems that deal with the sexual abuse. It's some of my best work, and also

I'm like, "How did that happen?" I was able to say it to my new partner. After I said it to her, because that felt the safest, then I was able to say it to my therapist, and after I said it to my therapist, then I could write the poem. It was something that I had worked really hard not to say for a really long time, so looking at that poem reminds me of the work that I did to get to the place where I could write the poem. In a way, the poem sort of stands as a little archive, like a tiny little monument of this time that I was a little bit brave in a very roundabout way.

So I think the poems hold the process.

What role has therapy played in thinking about your work?

I don't talk about the poems that I'm writing in therapy, but if I've written something that feels related to what we're talking about, then I will sometimes ask if they would be interested in reading those poems.

It's often after I've written the thing, because I feel like my poems are a clearer distillation, sometimes, of how I'm thinking or how I have thought about something, and so I think it should be helpful to people who are trying to help me be a better person. Especially around the abuse as a topic in therapy, which I have spent the last three years really focusing on. And then I was like, "I'm done." It comes up, it still comes up.

And again, that's the culmination, it was like 15 years and then the three years. It wasn't just like I said, "Oh, I'm going to go into therapy and talk about these things for three years and then I'll be done." I had to peel back all the other layers to get to that. That's made my poems, I think, feel, to me, more honest and more careful, and it feels like I can say things that are really hard to say, and also difficult to hear, in a way that feels careful and thoughtful for both me as the writer and my speaker, who is a version of me but who is not quite me, and then also the reader. So it's not just like, "Here's this trauma without the artifice." The artifice is nice. The artifice is like a little pillow around the trauma, and a reminder that I'm okay and my speaker is okay, and hopefully the reader feels safer in that space.

I'm struck by your use of time, and how, in one poem ["Little Box from Bestiary"], just how fluid this sense of time seems to me. The now in conversation with the before, with the childhood you. That dialogue can feel very honest in reading it. So many of your poems do this.

The thing that happened when I was in California is that I started the *Courage to Heal* workbook. So this is after *Bestiary*, and one of the exercises in the workbook was to write a letter to my younger self. Something, I think, sort of opened after that, where I started to give myself permission to address more directly the younger parts of myself that are also the oldest parts.

I just would ask myself questions, and there were a few things that I found out. The first one is that there are people who have internal running narration and people who don't. I was like, "Okay, that's actually super helpful," because I have a constant internal narration. The other thing was I found about the integrated family systems form of therapy, which I haven't done, but in that therapeutic model there are parts, and there are firefighters and there are managers. One of the questions that I started asking was, if I was having a reaction that was outsized to what was going on, I would just ask myself, "How old are you?" And almost always there was an age.

Sometimes everybody's freaking out. There are some six and eight year old parts, and there are some 13, 15 year old parts. There was the 20 year old part. The teenagers are awful. One of the things that it does is it narrativizes the location of the reaction and the specific time in my life that that reaction is coming out of, so that I, whenever the present is, can sort of say, "Oh, actually, it's all okay. As it turns out, right now, how old am I? 36 year old Donika has this. I got it, everything's okay," and I can sort of speak to that moment, because I can remember the moment.

It's been helpful in my work. This is where it gets back to the work, when I'm writing about something that is traumatic and I start becoming very anxious. Then I can sort of, with compassion and with thoughtfulness, just ask around, like what's going on? To myself, and in extending that gentleness, I think it helps delineate between

what's now and what's then.

In the new book, the sections are actually titled "Now," "Then," "Now," "Then." That sort of typical element of time is really foregrounded. The two threads that I'm writing about in the new book are, the thing that was happening in the present, the end of my marriage, and then the abuse, which had happened many years before. It was helpful to split those, or acknowledge the distance between them.

Do you have a note-taking process or a way that works for you to store ideas?

I don't have a note-taking process. I don't have a journaling practice. It's a haphazard process. It works.

I have a subscription to the *Great Courses Plus*, which is video lectures. They're not super exciting video lectures, but there's a series on the oceans, like a couple of physics series, where I'm like, "Oh, I'm really interested in these concepts," but I'm not a scientist. I have some notebooks with notes from watching those. Only time will reveal whether or not that was a useful thing to do.

There's that, lots of YouTube videos, lots of Wikipedia searches for things. Sometimes I read newspaper articles. I'm really interested in whales right now. There are some interesting pieces that I've saved in a folder in my Dropbox, but otherwise I'm like, "Have I looked at them lately?" I haven't.

If I type it, I save it. There are little scraps of things kind of floating around, and, if I'm writing something, I hit a point where I'm like, "Didn't I write something about this?" And I can go hunt it up and it's not actually in a finished piece, or even if it's in a finished piece, but not particularly strong, then I will cannibalize those pieces. I will take out, repurpose, upcycle them.

How do you cultivate your sense of perception and how does it affect your work?

Okay, so the thing that I think about is I am easily distracted. There are lots of deer that run through the backyard or are just around. Poets write about deer all the time. I can't do anything with that. I can't do anything with these deer. Who has anything left to say about deer? Not me right now, even though there are so many.

Sunsets, I really get distracted by the sunset. Fall, leaves changing. I'm a very basic kind of person. Many things are beautiful to me, so I think that when I am in a space where it feels possible to write, it's often that I have observed something that is close to but somewhat outside of my basic perception, and the things that are drawing my attention. We just found out the word for a squirrel nest in a tree. It's called a drey. We get to see the squirrels just rehabbing their little nest for the winter. It's amazing.

Now, a drey might go into a poem, right? But the squirrels, it's just like, two squirrels in the backyard don't go in a poem, but the drey, I was interested. We were interested enough, both of us, to just be like, "What is this? What do you call it? How many live in there? What are the details?" That often means I have something to say.

How do you use spacing, punctuation, capitalization, within poetry, to get to an idea?

I have encouraged students to understand what the standard grammatical usage for, specifically, colons, commas, and semicolons are. Then they can manipulate them in their poems, create a sense of nesting by using multiple colons in a sentence. I think about colons as an unpacking.

I learned that from Bridget Kelly. I was reading *Song*. There are so many colons in that book, and I got so excited. I was in my 30s. I felt freed to manipulate. To use punctuation in the way that made the most sense for when I was writing, instead of following the rules of English grammar. It's helpful to know what the rules are, that's a sort of jumping off point.

I also had this conversation with my friend and poet Ladan Osman, who is wonderful. We were talking about how we, I'm Black American, she is Somali, bend and move English around which creates space, texture, and interest in the language. There's efficiency, but also slowing things. Why would I constrain my poem within the rules if my poem doesn't want to be constrained?

It's useful to know what the rules are to figure out how to play against them. There are going to be people who are really excited by the ways that language can bend and punctuation can twist or twerk. It feels exciting to me and not constraining at all. It's nice to have a base.

There's an essay Jaswinder Bolina wrote in his book *Of Color*, "Writing Like a White Guy," and he talks about this idea of what we're writing in is the language of whiteness and the language of privilege, and how to write as a person of color using this language to just ungender, to expand the language.

Yeah, I think that's what we do in our language all the time, and I feel like when people retreat back into the bastion of standard English, it's because they're afraid of change. They're like, "Oh no, you have to speak correctly." This language makes no sense. It's a nonsense, hard language. I love Black American English so much. It's so pleasing to me, the rhythm and the sound and the efficiency. Why wouldn't I try to reproduce that energy in my own work?

How do you think about your audience? Does it matter? How does the idea of audience affect the reading of your work in different places?

I try to write in a way that I would enjoy reading. I do feel that I'm writing in a tradition of folks who are relatively plainspoken. The diction is pretty clear, relatively easy to track, but the emotional landscape is complex.

When I am choosing works for readings, I do take into account the kinds of folks who may or may not be there. I have poems that are more fun to read. It's like trying to figure out am I going to be able to read this very erotic poem in this room? Will I feel comfortable doing that?

From *Bestiary*, I often read the love poems, and occasionally I would read the poems that were more about my family. If I had a hard day, it had been a rough week in therapy or whatever, I would be like, "Love poems. That's what's happening today."

I'm very interested in prioritizing my own comfort and my own interest. It can be helpful for young writers to consider that and to investigate with curiosity what their interests are, so that they can prioritize them. What feels good? What's going to feel exciting to read later? I love reading my own work.

I wish people would talk about their writing practices with more of that joy. I just know people love their own work, because why else would you do it? No one's like, "I need your poems." Nobody's ever said that. There must be some internal joy and excitement, and you just tap into it and are connected to it.

Donika Kelly Recommends:

Jelly Belly jelly beans

Good socks

A base layer

Minnie Riperton's "Seeing You This Way"

Naps. My preferred intervals are 20 minutes, 40 minutes, 2 hours.

Name

Donika Kelly

Vocation

Poet

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Ladan Osman