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As told to Loré Yessuff, 3076 words.

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On abandoning capitalistic achievement to seek the freedom of play

Poet and professor Ross Gay discusses the connection between writing and rollerskating, his past life as an aspiring professional football player, pursuing playfulness over professionalism, and not taking yourself too seriously.

How do you navigate this capitalistic yearning that we all struggle with?

I grew up kind of broke. I was taught to hustle. [Now] I make a good salary and I don't need to do things that I don't want to do. Still, there's something ravenous that I notice if I don't do that [capitalistic] thing. It feels like it comes from a feeling of deprivation, a feeling of fear that I think we're supposed to feel. I don't mean we're supposed to as souls. I think we're "supposed to" as creatures who are constantly being told that we're not enough. We're supposed to feel like we should do more and do more and compete and do the best and win. If you're lucky enough to be like, "Okay, so I don't have to do that," then also try to be like, "What's going to fill my heart? What's going to really actually give me the opportunity to ask my deepest questions?" Yeah, and if you need to write for a magazine article to pay the rent and all that, that's fine, too. For me, it's a constant working out. It's deep in here, that kind of anxiety.

I would imagine that it took you a long time to accept that you don't need to chase after things that you truly don't want. I feel like it's always there, right? But do you know at what point in your life it became a little bit more quiet?

Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's in the last probably five years.

Oh, wow.

I think maybe in the last five—not before the last 10 years—but the last five years where I'm more conscientious of, "Wait, that will be a task. That will be a pursuit." You know? Now, I'm lucky. I get to choose a little bit.

Would you say the difference between a task and a pursuit is then inspiration or how something motivates you?

It's sort of like if I'm doing something that... How can I put it... That kind of already resonates with some of the questions that I have or that in the process of doing it, I realize, "Oh, this is one of my questions" as opposed to something that is not part of my question. I'm thinking "if someone asked me to write a review [about] a book that I wasn't that interested in and they would pay me a lot of money and this and that, that would feel like a task. But, if someone asked me to write about a photograph that I thought was amazing and was already sort of like, "Oh my god, this is my wheelhouse of questions," then that's something that I would've done anyway. That's kind of the thing that I'm hoping for and trying to remind myself to do.

We've talked a little about the present moment. I'm also very interested in how you started, so can you kind of trace that for me? You were a college athlete. Did you always know that you wanted to be a writer?

Every time I'm asked this question I realize I'm not exactly sure, but one version of the story is that I was a sophomore in college and I was in a survey of American Literature class that I was not interested in at all. Actually, I went to college to play football and I was slow to the college part of it, but I had a professor who had me give a presentation on Amiri Baraka's work. He had me read a poem called "An Agony Is Now." I read it and it changed my life. I read that poem and then I started reading poems. I got his collection *Transbluesency* out of the library and was just deeply reading his work, but also reading all the writers around him. But then I think of other trajectories.

At that same time, I also became very good friends with some other people who were into the arts and stuff. I was deep into music. I was one of these kids who would really study the lyrics of whatever music I was listening to and listen to my folks' records really closely, the same song over and over and over. I think of that and then I think of my sports life. I've always been invested or curious about performance. Whether or not I would've said that... My relationship to sports was also a relationship to performance, you know? By which, I mean, it thrilled me a little bit to be the bad guy or something.

And then I think of where we grew up. We grew up in an apartment complex, just outside of Philadelphia. There were so many kids. The amount of constant negotiation that took place [between] a bunch of kids trying to get onto the football field or into the game of manhunt or whatever we were playing. And the languages, the many languages that we were all sharing.

That's so cool how different aspects of your life that on the surface may not seem related to what you're doing all definitely informed and kind of led to you being in Bloomington and teaching and writing and performing.

Yeah, totally.

In a different kind of way, it's really fascinating and almost freaky to look back on our past selves. It could've gone so many different ways and either way it's just weird to think how we're always in conversation with who we were and who we are. I'm fascinated by that.

Yeah, me too. To, in retrospect, be like, "Oh, I was learning that then." I was practicing at this. God, it didn't seem like this but I was really practicing it. If you told me when I was in eighth grade with my buddy Jay doing some stupid shit like breeding fruit flies... If you told me at the time, "Oh, you're preparing for a life as a writer, et cetera," [I would've said] "No, I'm not. I'm preparing for a life of being naughty."

How did you decide to start writing and eventually pursue a career?

It feels like I very much stumbled into it. I really had grander designs on being a professional athlete. When I was a kid, I wanted to play football professionally and then even as I was finishing my college career, I was actually training to try to get my way into professional football in some kind of way. When I was there, that was my whole first year of grad school and maybe my second year, too. I wasn't quite done with this other sort of imagined trajectory. I was eating like crazy, I was 260 pounds and lifting. I just had a vision, had a sort of fantasy, then it stopped eventually. It just sort of slid away, I think. I just rolled into a Ph.D. program after my MFA and I just didn't want to get a job was really the reason I did that. I just didn't want to get a job.

Were you always thinking of writing poems as something that could become a job or were you just generally like, "I don't want to get a day job."

Yeah, I think I just didn't want a day job. I knew I wanted to make art in some way. The thing was to figure out how not to really have to work. [My parents] hated their jobs. My dad worked Burger King or Red Lobster and he always worked 60 or 70 hours a week. And my mom worked for a bank, a job she didn't give a shit about and she worked a lot too. So regular, dutiful, and I love them for taking care of us, but I also was like, "God, that is so..." I don't know. I don't know if I'd last with that. When I was in grad school, I would work construction jobs that would come up and then go away. I worked at basketball camps. I'd go do a weekend thing, make 500 bucks and be good for a little bit. But that idea of...

The 9:00 to 5:00?

Oh man. Yeah, I think some people, it feels good to and [for] some people really not good to.

You've never wished that you could just clock in and clock out?

I'm really not good at having to be somewhere.

That's so admirable that you figured out ways to make that work. That makes me wonder if you had a certain belief in yourself because I feel like it's impossible to follow that trajectory unless you do, right?

Yeah, I probably did. I probably had enough. I can hear myself saying things that make me cringe now, that [could be] read as a kind of belief in oneself, which makes me think in some way, I probably had a certain belief in myself and at the same time, I know in fact that I was profoundly insecure at the same time, you know? I don't know, maybe it's belief in oneself or maybe hope.

That feels like a better way to guide oneself to something than what we're told, you know?

Oh my god. Totally, totally. Obviously, it's hard to negotiate all of the things that we're told by all of the things that tell us things, to discern, to get rid of all that noise and to hear actually, "What do I actually want to sing about?" Which is why it's so lovely when you have beloveds who will be like, "I don't think that's actually what you're... Are you really interested in that?" I've had really beautiful friends over the years be like, "Why are you doing that?"

There's this tendency in American culture for us to fully equate our identities, our worth to what we're doing on a daily basis for work. I'm wondering if that's a struggle for you and how you resist that temptation. Also, I would assume by resisting that temptation, there are other things that have to nourish you, fill you up, so I'm wondering what those things are for you.

It's a great question because I was thinking [about] my job is as a teacher. I love [teaching]. It's really fun to me. Hanging out with folks is really fun, spending time together and working on our imagination. I'm deeply involved in gardening and serious about basketball in certain kinds of ways and I have all these friendships and I get kind of deep into whatever, music or letterpress printing or any number of things come up for me. Rollerskating. In this building where I work, it's so empty around here these days. At night, I was up here in this building rollerskating.

That's so nice.

Oh my god, it's so good. The floor is perfect. No one's around. And [I'm] not necessarily good at it, I'm always falling down.

I love that at any given moment, people are preparing dinner, crying, talking to their mom, whatever and Ross Gay is probably around in the building rollerskating.

He's rollerskating.

That's so precious to me.

Your question makes me think that my writing life is not particularly discrete from the rest of my life. In part because the more I'm with it, the more it's just holding the questions that I have, period. It's not like I go to write to think about things that I'm not thinking about otherwise. It's kind of like, man, I got these roller skates. What's the feeling of trying to learn how to roller skate backwards? Let me think about... Oh, this is writing.

In a way, I don't know that I feel like there's a separation between the things and I think there's something to that it's important and precious in a way, but not more important or precious than... I was going to say my rollerskating life. But in a way, I just mean it's all part of the same thing.

It's all interconnected, yeah.

I believe this—It's most important to take care of this thing that we do, which is one of the ways that we are in community or, for me, I feel like it's one of the ways that I practice and study being with other people in my writing life.

[Writing] is not discreet from or more important than really just looking closely at [something]. Or really just having a conversation with someone. They're not discreet and one is not more important than the other.

Is that how you keep yourself in check then from leaning into the capitalistic hell hole?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. It might be and also, the sort of preciousness of the writer or the artist, that kind of specialness. It's special, whatever, but everything's kind of special.

And I think maybe too, just in a practical way, it's kind of like, "Yeah, I'm going to go sit down and fuck around for a little bit," as opposed to I'm going to go and sit until everything comes out and if it doesn't come out genius, then what is it? What am I doing?

That's extremely inspiring because it seems like ultimately—and this is no surprise to me just based on all of your work that I've read—but it seems like... the difference between the way our society tells us to think about work versus the way that you think about your work is that our world tells us you have to be... Well, there's this sort of professionalism that's expected, which in some ways might be important too, it's important to show up to things, it's important to commit. But that should just be about being a good person. Anyway, it seems like instead of giving into that, you are just looking for ways to play and imagine and still taking your work seriously, but also not taking yourself too seriously. Is that correct?

You said it exactly right. Playing, exploring, attempting, and wondering is so important. It's so important and it feels like a practice a sort of vocation—in all kinds of things, it just feels important not to necessarily make it beautiful or not to necessarily make it the best or not to have aspirations to be the best. But to have it be like what you said, a sort of play.

To me, that is profoundly rigorous and it's a kind of suspension of something. If we're able to, at least to some extent, approach work with a playful sensibility or relationship to play rather than relationship to accomplishment.

I mean, I think I'd probably be happier, we'd be happier but also, I just feel like... I don't know. It just might be more interesting. In my own experiences, I think I write stuff that I want to read again when I'm not trying to be the best, when I'm just sort of...unfixing things.

I also feel like when you're approaching work through that lens, you're more inclined to write stuff that is tune with yourself, with your voice, your soul, whatever you want to call that thing. Whereas I found that if my main motivation is to "accomplish" something or get a pitch accepted or get a poem accepted or whatever, then I end up chasing this idea of what a writer is supposed to be, instead of going back to the roots of myself. Ultimately, for me, poetry is just about being in communion with ideas and thoughts and trying to, yeah, like what you said, imagine and play and engage with the invisible things. But I feel like you can't do those things at the same time. You can't try to achieve and play.. I don't know.

I think it's a great question. Can you be trying to achieve and be trying to play? It feels like there's some tension between the two. There might be some potential overlap, but there's absolutely some tension between play—which is I think probably exploratory, experimental, does not have a kind of terminal point—and achievement, which is in a different kind of relationship to maybe all those things.

In the beginning of the pandemic, a friend and I were going on a walk, talking about how we wished you had [social media] so we could see how you're dealing with this right now. Of all the people on Earth, we wish we could just have a short little tweet from you. What is your relationship to the internet, social media, all that?

I never got into that and I suspect it wouldn't be great for my mental health.

Yeah, you're not missing anything honestly.

Okay. Yeah, thank you.

There's some good memes but I don't know if it's worth all the other stuff.

I understand it as having a utility. [But] it's a pace that I'm not particularly interested in. I think ultimately, there's something, both ethically and aesthetically, that disinclines me from that, but also something self-preservational. I just don't think it would be good for my brain... I have a telephone, but I just turn it off.

Do you ever feel like you're missing out from the art world?

No. God, oh my god. Not even a drop. Again, I'm 46 years old, I live in Indiana.

How are you finding delight these days? How are you balancing everything?

Right away when things started shutting down, I found myself wanting to collaborate a little bit. So I got into writing these long poems with friends or doing things collaboratively, figuring out ways to collaborate. Gardening is a thing that I adore. So, that's that.

One of the things I learned in [writing *The Book of Delights*] is that to some extent, the practice is just to find what's with you wherever you go.

The cat who lives with us, her name is Daisy, had been gone for two weeks and we were a little bit like, "Well, maybe Daisy's gone." I had started to imagine my life without her. Then, I was taking some compost out and I walked back to the house and Daisy was like, "Meow." She showed up and I was like, "Oh, that's a delight."

Ross Gay Recommends:

John Edgar Wideman's *Writing to Save a Life*

Harry Dodge's *My Meteorite*

Ralph Lemon's lectures

solitude

sleep

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