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As told to Rebecca Hiscott, 2828 words.

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# On writing as a form of magic

Writer Lisa Marie Basile on transitioning between full-time and freelance work, becoming compulsively organized, the study and practice of witchcraft, and why writing remains the ultimate form of magic.

**You're a freelance writer, a poet, the founder of a magazine, and a published author. How do you balance all of the different aspects of your writing practice?**

I've become addicted to making sure I'm organized. If you'd asked me several years ago if I'd ever keep a spreadsheet with my duties or times, there's no way I would have said yes, because I'm chaotic, evil, and there's nothing that scares me more than being organized. But stepping into a full-time freelance role about two years ago on top of writing a book and running a magazine, my mental state was crashing. Now I use Google spreadsheets to keep track of what I'm doing, which days I need to do them on, what the priorities are for the day and for the week. And I build in time slots for fun, extra stuff. That might be writing Instagram captions or creating images for *Luna Luna*. It isn't actually work, but it's creative nourishment for the projects. I try to give myself enough time to do each [project] every few days so that I don't get overburdened on any one day.

**Do your processes and routines differ when you're writing poetry or an essay or working on a book?**

Writing an article, I do it in the morning when my brain is the most clear. Writing a book, I focus on doing a chapter or a part of a chapter at night when I'm alone, when I can sit with my thoughts, when my language and my vocabulary has become more literary and fluid and comfortable because I'm out of the business mindset of the morning. I write poetry typically super late at night with a glass of wine, when the subconscious mind starts to take over. You become a little less human and worker-bee, and you become a vessel for the information to pour into you.

**I love that idea of writing poetry in the evening, when the subconscious mind takes over.**

Yeah. It just feels like I can trust the deeper, darker parts of my brain to make an appearance. It's like velvet. It comes out with this softness that you want for poetry.

**Making a living as a full-time writer, especially a full-time freelancer, can seem impossible these days. How did you figure out how to make a living through your writing?**

I had been working normal, full-time office jobs for almost a decade, in editorial or media or content creation. In 2017, I was working full-time for a health company and doing their content when I got super sick. I got [diagnosed with] ankylosing spondylitis, which is a chronic illness. I was freelancing while working full-time, so I had a bunch of clients and freelance contacts already built up. I was able to leave the job when I got sick with those anchor clients in my pocket, which is something I would suggest for anyone who's trying to make the transition. If I didn't have freelance clients and contacts, there's no way I could have jumped into the abyss and financially survived.

It was important to get at least four or five main clients that I knew I could depend on for monthly writing assignments that would make up at least more than my rent. That was the goal from the get-go. And then it became, "Okay, more than my rent plus food, plus whatever else."

Getting sick forced me to leave my full-time job, and it forced me to send 5,000 emails to anyone and everyone asking if they would take me on as a writer. From there I leapt, and I got lucky. I would say it took seven to eight years of building connections to make that leap. I don't think everyone needs seven to eight years, but I do think you need to put dedicated energy and effort into finding anchor clients.

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**Do you feel like social media played a role in building your career?**

I'm very active on social, mostly on Instagram and Twitter. I'm not in any way an influencer, but I think it helps to create a community. That can definitely help in book promotion or spreading the word about something. But when it comes to being a freelancer, I would say what you really need to be successful is a bevy of solid contacts, follow-through, reliability, flexibility, and a relentless willingness to reach out to people constantly. So, sure, you can have a great Twitter feed, but if you're not making deadlines or reaching out or doing your homework, it doesn't really matter at the end of the day.

**When did witchcraft and magic come into your life, and when did it entwine with your writing practice?**

As a child, I went to Catholic school. [I was] raised in a Sicilian Catholic family. Pretty soon I found atheism and thought, "Religion is not for me." Through my twenties, I was dealing with a lot of family trauma. I was in foster care for some time. Both of my parents were struggling with addiction. Religion made me angry. I always grappled with, "Do I believe in something? Am I just traumatized and angry?"

Then, in my later twenties, I decided that a way to work through some of that trauma was to find intentionality and mindfulness. I know that sounds a bit cheesy or fluffy, but it really did work for me. And it was around the time people started talking about witchcraft. I'd always had an interest. My dad was big into the occult. I was obsessed with ghosts and I read *Strega Nona*, which was a popular children's book about witches when I was a kid. I used to like to play in the woods and conjure fairies.

But it was in my late twenties that I realized people were using witchcraft as a way of reclaiming their own narrative, tapping into feminism, connecting with community. I wanted to explore that, and I created *Luna Luna*. I found my beliefs changing. The witch is an archetype of strength and rebellion and power and empowerment, and it really spoke to me. Combining that magic and ritual with writing made the most sense to me, so I started adopting writing rituals and using writing as a way of tapping into the divine, or tapping into the deeper self.

**In *Light Magic for Dark Times*, you share spells and rituals inspired by personal experiences. How do you create a spell?**

I start with the emotional motivation, because when we think about spells and rituals, we think, "I have to do this [spell] to change something or tap into something." Even if you're not trying to externally influence something, you're trying to change something within yourself. So I try to look at that emotional motivation, the need, the hunger. And then I think about, is there an action you can do to symbolize working toward that thing? Is there a phrase or a word or an incantation you can say to breathe that into reality? Is there a tool or a physical object to represent your desire or your goal?

Those are the pieces, and then I put it together from there. But I'm not a traditional witch. Italian folk magic is big into using whatever you have in your house. I'm inspired by that. So for me it's all about whatever you've got around you, your intention, and putting your emotion into it. If that makes it unstructured, that's totally fine, because at the end of it all, magic is about your heart and what you want versus having the most expensive crystal.

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**The *Magical Writing Grimoire* is about writing as a magical practice. How do you see writing as a form of magical ritual?**

Writing is creating something out of nothing, which is how I see magic. You're taking a blank slate and forging something from it. That can be something that changes you, which is, to me, spellwork. Whether we write for ourselves or in our diary or in a letter to someone that we never even send, we're changing something in ourselves. We're facing a truth. We're tapping into something that scares us and standing up to it. When we write an essay or a poem and we share it with the world, we're basically saying, "This is me," and that changes us.

So I think writing in itself is the most incredible form of magic. It can free us from shame, it can free us from stigma, it can help us reclaim our story and center our trauma on our power instead of our limitations. Which is, at the end of the day, what you hope a spell would do for you—to eliminate some of those sorrows and pains. All of my work has changed me by giving me my power back and my voice back, rather than having it taken from me.

**You write about trauma and chronic illness, and I imagine that going to dark places in your writing can be painful and difficult as well as cathartic. What do you do to take care of yourself when you have to go to those dark places?**

In the past, I leaned into it. I thought, "This is a form of shadow work. It's an investigation of the deeper self, and it's a good thing." And it is a good thing, but you need to regiment it.

When you're doing this sort of trauma recovery work or you're exploring memory or you're doing any sort of therapeutic writing, you have to give yourself a limit. You have to give yourself a way of grounding yourself back into reality. So if I'm going to journal, I'm going to journal for an hour, and then I'm

going to have something immediately afterward that brings me back to myself. I might do some serious writing therapy and then I'll immediately watch *Downton Abbey* afterward, because you can get lost in the abyss and it's harder to come back up for air. We need to treat that sort of exploration as a form of work, and work days have an end.

**We're at this moment in time where magic and spiritual practices and witchcraft have become more mainstream. What do you think resonates with people about magic and ritual? Is it a good thing? A bad thing? Is it a fad?**

I mean, I think about that article that came out a few weeks ago ["I spent a week becoming a witch and the results were worrying" in *The Independent*]. The issue with that is that it messages to people that spirituality and witchcraft is a quick little thing you can do as a hobby or for fun, when in reality, the vast, vast subcultures within spirituality and witchcraft take work and dedication and study. They take inner exploration, and they take working with community. You can't become anything in a week.

So there's a risk that because it's popular, people look at it like, "Let me just try this on because it's cool." But also, because it's so popular, people are being given an alternative to black-and-white religious ideology. People are being told that spirituality is something that is flexible, that you can cater to your own needs, whether you believe in gods or deities or nothing at all.

I don't believe in anything, but for me it's grounding. It's helping me find intention. It's helping me find power. It's helping me find community. It can be many things to many people, and that's the beauty of it. In an age of disconnection, from being on the internet all the time and being inside at our computers and away from nature, witchcraft and spirituality are giving us access to those more natural, beautiful things we're missing out on.

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**I really like how you write about magic and witchcraft as being connected to resistance and protest and social justice.**

When you look at the history of witches across the globe, you see that they're the marginalized, silenced, punished ones. And because of that history, anyone who practices magic has a responsibility to ensure that doesn't happen to others. I think it's innate to magical practice, which is so focused on nature and intuition and creating goodness that you better stick up for people who are being segregated and punished and put into prisons because of their color or their class. Witches make the world a better place, and that's part of it—standing up.

**How else can we guard ourselves against capitalism taking the "magic" out of magic?**

It's probably going to look different for everyone, but part of it is knowing where you're buying certain things. Knowing that you don't need to buy anything at all. Knowing that your practice is going to look different from someone else's and that the things you see on Instagram are curated, so you don't have to go out and invest in X, Y, or Z item in order to be a valid and practicing witch.

[Also] being careful with your language. A lot of witches and people writing about witchcraft are doing a great job making everyone feel welcome. But there are probably some people out there who make others feel like they have to take a really expensive course or buy a really expensive crystal or tarot deck. You really, really do not. You can be totally valid without spending a dime.

**How do you define success in your work?**

My definition of success has changed. At first, it was paying rent, because that was literally the foundation of what I needed. But now, the definition has evolved so that I feel it is being able to work and being able to breathe and play as well. Knowing when to shut the computer, giving myself the amount of time I need for rest and recalibration, and being privileged enough to build in those times of rest because I've made the space for it by doing hard work. It's about finding balance in addition to supporting myself.

**What's something you wish someone had told you when you first started writing?**

The cream doesn't always rise to the top. You're going to be in a sea of people with vastly different skill sets and talents and voices. Some people are going to be incredible and get no publicity, no publishing deals, and some people will seem to have it all who just aren't that great. Stop comparing yourself to others. Every circumstance is different. Just keep chiseling away and make your space. Some things are more sellable, some things are less sellable, and it's okay. There's room for all of it. And try to give props to those people you believe in.

I definitely have days of envy or thinking that I have failed in some way. I remind myself that that's natural and that social media is playing a part in the way we perceive others and ourselves because we're living in this uber-curated reality. I think doing your best is the only thing you can do when you see other people succeed and it makes you feel something about yourself. The energy spent on questioning why somebody has something you don't is just burned fuel. Use it to create something else. Give yourself maybe an hour to feel crappy and then move on. You can't be perfect all the time, but you also can't linger in it.

Lisa Marie Basile Recommends:

How to Not Always Be Working. This book offers the opportunity to take stock of what is work, what isn't, and what falls in between—especially for folks who freelance.

@bymariandrew. This Instagram account always soothes me when my mind spirals (#poetbrain) and I get into a state of sensory overload.

Clash Books. This NY-based publisher is doing all sorts of rad, experimental, diverse books: poetry, nonfiction, weird hybrid genre stuff. Leza and Christoph, who run it, spend a lot of time nurturing writer/artist relationships and heavily promoting their books.

Entropy Mag's Foster Care series. As a former foster youth, I think it's critical that we share these perspectives, and I'm so grateful to Sylvia and the team at Entropy for publishing these works.

Angelica ASMR. Honestly, this ASMR channel is everything. I play it in the background as I write all the time. Angelica does all sorts of weird-ass, totally unexpected role-plays (nuns, Renaissance ladies, even satirical plays on other ASMR videos). 10/10 recommend.

Name

Lisa Marie Basile

Vocation

Poet and writer


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