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As told to Mark Sussman, 2117 words.

Tags: Writing, Art, Process, Beginnings, First attempts, Money, Identity, Success.



On giving yourself permission to suck

**An interview with television writer and Navajo tapestry weaver Sierra Teller
What made you go from watching television to wanting to make television?**

Weirdly, I've always wanted to do it. Ever since I was like a little kid. Like my whole life I've always wanted to do it. I [wrote for University of Arizona's comedy troupe] Comedy Corner. That was one of the first leaps I took. I was obsessed with SNL as a kid, and then going and seeing live sketch comedy and being like, "Oh, this is something you can just do."

I was like, I'll write a couple of sketches based on something I know. So I wrote two really bad sketches. And then I went in with very low expectations. I was very low-self esteem-y. But doing that and actually getting to do a show every week, and work collaboratively, work with big personalities, work with people who hated you, who liked you—it was good training for what I do now. And that was the first time where I was like, "Oh, this could actually be a thing."

For five years [after college], I worked with the National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian. That whole job was programming films, so I got paid to write about movies and watch movies, but I wasn't making anything. I would get to meet these filmmakers when they would come to town and they'd be like, I'm going to Berlin, I'm going here, I'm going there, and I'd just be so jealous. I would just get to process their paperwork. And so eventually I was like, "I'm going to do this or I'm not going to do this." I really wanted to write for television, and they were offering these programs for Native writers to teach you, to go to New Mexico for a month and try to figure out if you can write for television.

So I went out there. I wrote a really bad *30 Rock* [script] to get in, and then they helped me write an okay *30 Rock*. And then I applied to a bunch of programs, and I got into one in Los Angeles. Once they said I was in, I quit my job and my boyfriend, put all my shit in storage, and I came out to Los Angeles.

What did it feel like at the moment when you made the decision to leave D.C., told your boyfriend, and bought the plane ticket?

It was super scary, but it was also like there was no other choice for me. I met all these people who loved working in the government and they worked there for like 30 years. My parents were weird hippies, so I was always uncomfortable working in a stable environment, getting paid every two weeks. I don't know how to do that. My mom is a Master Navajo Tapestry Weaver. It was feast or famine. She'd get a check for like eight grand and we had to live on that for four months. So I was in a situation where it was super scary, but it was also weirdly comfortable. It was like, "This is what I should be doing."

In the late '80s [my mother] and my aunt wove this giant tapestry and it changed the course of our life. It won this huge award at the Santa Fe Indian Market in 1987. And we were on CNN, we were in *Business Week*. We all traveled to England when I was four to do this weaving demonstration at the British Museum.

We were living on the reservation at the time. But we went from weaving at the British Museum, and we ended up being in an Al Pacino movie, my dad went drinking with Ron Wood one night at the hotel. All of these crazy things happened to us. It was this insane situation. And then we went back to the reservation. My dad was like, "We have to get out of here." Both of my parents were like, "We can't stay here." And so they made a big swing.

You're in a situation now that seems more stable. How are you adjusting?

It's hard. I mean, it is and it isn't. You get a job on a show and then the show could get canceled at any moment. You come to work and you think you're just going to work your eight hours, your 12 hours, and then they're like, "show is canceled." And then you put all your stuff in a bag and go home. With that hanging over your head every day, it doesn't totally feel stable.

This is the first year where I'm taking some time off. I'm taking six months off to hang out with my kid and get new ideas and not be in a room eating pasta at 9 PM with people who aren't my family. I know I have enough money saved up that I don't have to work for a few months unless I want to. It's very difficult to put that work ethic on yourself, to find a way to have home time, family time, self-care, and work. And also just to have quiet brain time, try to stare out a window and figure out what you want to write next.

After you spend time organizing your ideas, how do you sit down and actually get the writing done?

I definitely don't think anyone likes writing. No one likes writing. At least, I don't think any great writer likes writing. It's the worst. To live in anxiety, it's the worst. I do a lot of therapy. I have always done therapy a lot, but it really helped me moving out here. I'm just a huge fan of therapy.

I'm currently at a place called Wi Spa. It's a Korean spa. It's like 20 bucks to get in, but it's the best place in the world. But I'll write for 20 minutes and then I'll go sit in the hot tub for 10 minutes, and then I'll come back up and write for an hour. And I will surround myself with luxury in order to get it out. And it's a \$20 luxury, but that is what I'll do. The hardest part is just getting it out, getting out the bad draft and accepting that you're going to be bad at it.

I'm not a child of immigrants, but I was raised by children of immigrants. I think brown people and women are taught that you have to be better than everybody to get half as far. You're taught this insane work ethic, so if it's not perfect, it's garbage. And the way you actually create art is by making garbage first, and then getting better and better. And so giving yourself permission to suck is such a hard thing to do. I think that's why a lot of brown people who come from certain situations, and I'm only speaking for myself, not for all brown people, have that problem. Especially women. We're taught that you have to be perfect. You're not allowed to make mistakes. That's the advice I always give writers at panels: make mistakes in front of as many people as you can.

From the outside, the film and television industry seems very Byzantine, impersonal, and mechanical. How do you carve a space out for yourself where you can feel some sense of individuality within that system?

I am a plus-size Navajo Latina woman, so there aren't that many people who look like me in these rooms. In terms of my individuality, I'll always feel like I'm different. And whether people mean to or not, I will be made to feel like I'm different just because of how I look and where I come from and where my family comes from, right?

I think you can't help but start to mimic the systems that you've been in. Writers on a show will write a pilot, and it will be very similar to the show they worked on before. So it's really hard because you can't help but think of those people's voices or think of those rhythms. You can kind of get into a problem where you start pitching to go home, so you start pitching what you know the showrunner will like versus what you think is good.

And then when you leave, you almost have venom in your blood. You've got to work that out and try to figure out, "What do I actually like?" I try to just see as much stuff as I can, start watching movies again, and start looking at things in a more discerning way. Start reading more and just sort absorb what's going on in my life versus how to make [the showrunner] happy. It's just a different muscle.

I worked on a show called *Superstore*, I took pride in trying to be like an ambassador to people who shop at Wal-Mart and Target, because that's my family. That's where I come from, that's who I am. I love, love Wal-mart in Tucson. That's where we'd just hang out because we weren't allowed in bars. There are so few opportunities for us to get shown on television. I always feel a very deep responsibility to make sure whatever's shown isn't necessarily positive, but that it's an honest portrayal, or an interesting portrayal, or more complex than anticipated. And so to me, working on *Superstore* with a Latina female lead [America Ferrera], I got to say, "This is where I come from." I remember we did an episode where her parents didn't hire movers. I was like poor people don't hire movers. They have cousins. They might rent a truck. And my boss was like, "oh, that's better." Let's have them rent a truck. And they forget to rent the truck, so now she has to do this.

I lived in a very diverse area of Washington, D.C. It was gentrifying at the time, and they built this huge Super Target. And within a week, there were homeless guys bathing in there. There were these women in little fold-out chairs right out front, still doing their thing, talking and chatting like nothing was different. I was like, "Yes! It's like when like old buildings have ivy grow over them, like, don't fucking give up."

And it sucks. I wish on the reservation that not everybody shopped at Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart is an evil company. It's terrible to women, they're discriminatory, they created a horrible culture. But I personally love the sort of hard-scrabble possibility to make it work. I do think those people are amazing.

You wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* in the wake of Donald Trump's egregious comments at a ceremony honoring Navajo Code Talkers. In it, you identify what you call a particularly Navajo comedic sensibility. How did that sensibility influence your approach writing comedy?

I remember my dad was saying that, when he first came to my mom's house, there's this big kitchen table they were around. He was like, everyone was just laughing. He had no idea what anyone was saying, because everyone's speaking Navajo, but they're telling jokes. And he was like, "You just never think Native people are going to be funny because of the stereotype of the stoic Indian, the quiet Indian."

There's no word in Navajo for "I'm sorry." And to me, that's amazing. You just have to walk around and hope the person forgives you eventually. There's something very biting and unforgiving about our culture and our language that I just think is so funny. Everyone in my family will try to find a joke. They'll always try to undercut a tense situation. And I think that it's gallows humor. Native people have been given the hardest time throughout history. And so it doesn't surprise me that we'd have sort of a dark outlook. But you learn very quickly, and you're taught to be resilient. It's just our temperament. I don't know if it's like the heat, I don't know if we're just sort of crabby and find the negative parts of things.

Sierra Ornelas recommends:

Giving up caffeine if you have anxiety (or at least holding out until 11am)

This documentary made by Indigenous children in Brazil From the Ikpeng Children to the World

Chris Rock's latest stand-up special, *Tamborine*

Buying American Indian art from American Indians

Writing notes on paper. I sound a hundred years old, but an article I did not read said it helps to remember and to process.

Name

Sierra Teller Ornelas

Vocation

Writer, Producer, Navajo Tapestry Weaver

Fact



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