

# On removing beliefs that hold you back



Writer and activist Abigail Mlinar Burns discusses getting clear on boundaries, how family and creative practice feed each other, and learning to follow your impulses.

January 23, 2026 -

As told to Sophy Drouin, 3716 words.

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**How do you define success and failure? What would you consider a failure or success? Do you use those barometers in your day to day life or not?**

Young Abby was really attached to the idea of success. Young Abby was born in 1992 and had a lot of “successful” female role models in popular culture to look up to. My idea of success when I was young meant recognition and a level of public awareness, I guess, about myself and my work. Now, I think success much more means being completely true to myself and achieving what my inner self knows to be my potential. It’s more, I know myself, and I know what feels good and aspirational. When you get those tingles when you think about something and it makes you feel excited and you start longing for that, even if it’s uncomfortable and embarrassing to admit-like I remember when I first moved here four years ago, I went on a walk with a friend of mine who had moved here around the same time, and at the end of this walk I said, “I feel like I need to say this out loud to somebody and I want to say it out loud to you.” I said, “I want to write a book.” I was so embarrassed. I was so fucking embarrassed. Like who am I to think that I can write a book, you know? It just felt ridiculous. But then why did it feel ridiculous? Because anybody can write a book, and why would I not do it just because I thought it was ridiculous?

So that is success to me: comfort to say the thing, comfort to do the thing that you say you wanted to do not just because you said it but because you know that it’s something that you’d really like to. So having written a book—even just the third draft that I’ve done—I feel successful. It has nothing to do with if it gets published. Even if it sits in the Google Drive forever, I will feel, and I do feel, a sense of satisfaction with myself that I accomplished it. And failure would be ignoring myself. And like, shelving my whole self. In seasons of life, you must—it’s required to shelve aspects of yourself. But if I ever got to a place where my whole self was shelved or put away as I prioritized other things, that would feel like failure.

**How do you manage to create a path outside of the established system, if you consider your path outside of the established system?**

I do think my path is outside of the established system, I suppose. And I think it’s always been. I’ve always had a very strong inner voice. My problems have come more from turning myself down. So when it comes to work, when I was super young, in high school, I think that I was turning myself down and saying “No don’t do what you think you should do because this other route is smarter, more responsible,” whatever. And so learning to listen to myself is why I think I’m on this other route. I’ve always worked from home, really. I had one office job, and that lasted like a year and a half, and it was really uncomfortable for me. I think a lot of people are like this. Being behind a desk for eight hours a day—that structure doesn’t suit me. I like to be able to follow my whims

and structure my time when it feels best and, I suppose a lot of it comes back to the privileges I've had. The most important one to me is having a loving family growing up. I think I have this core sense of safety in me and, even though my mom passed when I was young, [my dad] was such a stable rock for me that even though he's never been a financial provider for me as an adult, I still have this knowing within that if anything ever blows up, I can be on his couch and I wouldn't feel completely uncomfortable. It would still feel like I wasn't an autonomous person anymore, and that would be disappointing, but yeah, I always felt safe to pursue the routes I've had, and I guess that's also why I feel so moved by love in my work -it just feels like the most important thing to me.

**Are there any resources that are absolutely necessary to your work?**

The only valuable resource I think is time. It's the only thing that feels limited to me, you know? Money never feels like a resource that I even care about necessarily anymore, which is so fucking crazy because as a teenager it was the only thing that I thought about. I just had my dad's voice in my head of like, "worry about bills." He'd hate to know that this is something I think so much about, but I can picture him at the table, with like a bunch of papers strewn out, on speakerphone with the bank listening to every statement. Money was so stressful for him, and I knew it was so difficult and such a fixation. And I never wanted to feel that. I wanted to have so much money that I never had to ever be stressed. Not because I wanted to do anything with it just because I didn't want that pain. And I guess I've come through in life to a place where I've realized that I can just not feel that pain, without having the mountain of funds, and, yeah, it is a mind game in a way.

**It is in a way what happy endings talks about, your physical urges and the urges of your soul, the more you investigate them and connect to them, the louder they are.**

Totally! Yeah, in the same way that the better I listen to my, "oh this idea of dirty laundry is so interesting to me, let's write about this dirty laundry thing," that is exactly the same thing that's happened to me in my life about listening to my sexual urges, my sexual interests, and it is actually crazy because you know, you feel a little bit of shame about it, you feel a little bit like, "oh that's embarrassing I shouldn't do it." And then you're shutting your body down, you're putting boxes and barriers down in front of yourself for the future that you have to then work through. And it takes time, literally.

That's why I'm saying now, at 33, that I'm having the best orgasms I've ever had. And I can literally forecast, if you like charted out my sexual experiences alone and with partners through my life, I'd imagine that in a few years I'll be like those monks who can orgasm without even touching themselves, just by like projecting into the future. Like the amount of mind-body connection I've been able to foster, the improvement that my pleasure has experienced, and we're getting graphic now, but that's the exact thing that's happening to my artistic practice as well. Like, I'm not putting the barriers around myself. Like, my first impulse as a young kid was to be an artist. My earliest impulses were to write stories and to paint and to draw. And I put barriers and boxes over that impulse and said, "that's something irresponsible. That's something that will make me poor and something that will make me stressed about money 'just like my dad is.'"

I first thought I was going to pursue medicine. How fucking stupid. I would've hated that. I would've gotten so much debt. I would've hated it. And then I went into business, because I thought, "Oh, in theory I could make just as much money and I could still use an ounce of creativity." Anyway. Here we are. I'm proud of my younger self for hearing an inner something that kept leading me back to where I am now.

**What is a habit that you always have to fight against, and how do you do it?**

I'm not a super disciplined person. Like I'm not "8 o'clock I'm always at my desk writing." But I am creating and writing every day, and that wasn't always the case. It used to be weeks between, sometimes. I think it's just the better I got at following my urges, the better I got at listening to my urges, the more they come reliably, you know? Like if you listen to that inner thing that says, "oh yeah follow this thread right now," it just keeps coming. The thing that I fight is 100 percent [the] idea that I need to please somebody, and that comes through in so many different ways. Like "oh, I'm gonna let my employer down if I am not giving literally all of me." And like, "oh shit, I'm ignoring all of these people who need something from me when I am doing this thing for

myself." Whether that be my children, or my friends who I promised I'd read their thing, or my random subscribers who sent me a message that I've not responded to for five days, or my employer who's paying me to be on her clock. So that's something that I fight against: putting other people before me. And I'm getting much better at it. Like I'm clearly not suffering, because I'm writing everyday. But yeah, that's my little thing.

**How do you nourish your creative side when you're not actively creating?**

Ahhhh nourishing my creative side, I guess, to me means giving myself time to follow my curiosities. I think that one of the ways that I know I'm stuck is that nothing is interesting. If there's nothing that's captured my interest, and made me curious, that's how I know I'm a bit stuck and I need to come back to presence. So nourishing that would just be following my curiosities. Whether that means reading or giving myself context and space to find something interesting to read—being around magazines or being a consumer on Substack instead of just a producer, or being in a bookshop. Also, Joe [my husband] is my in-house film guy so he's really great at choosing things that appeal to both of us and inspire both of us, so that watching the TV feels like a well-spring, you know? And I just have always loved to be in museums. That is very nurturing to my creative life. I don't do it very much right now. I think that in this life phase, there are lots of parts of me that I've had to kind of put on a shelf for a jiff, and when I'm able to go back to that, that'll be a really awesome thing. And I'll be really excited about it, you know, like, "oh fucking hell, I get to go to museums once a month again, or once a week again." That'll be a thrill. So exciting! But I don't feel like I'm depriving myself, necessarily, by only going once a year. I miss it. But I've prioritized my life in a good way where the things that I know I'd feel deprived for not doing, I'm doing, and my life is full.

**What do you do when you get stuck?**

I am not so much a disciplined-person as I am a creative-energy-within-person. If I feel stuck, it's because my 'within energy' is stagnant. So what I do is take care of myself. Sounds kind of cliché or silly or something, but I meditate, I suppose. Just sit and be present in the world. Dance. Listen to music. Spend time with my people. Since most of my practice is about love, I just spend time with, and am present with, my people. And I fixate on a question—which is the meditation thing—like "how am I feeling love right now? What feels the most important to me in the realm of love right now?" Usually when I do both of those things, or either of those things, the question will come to me. Or the topic or the point. And if I have these ideas come through amidst my life, I jot notes down—usually in my phone, because it's always on me, and my life is very on the move. When I'm sitting at the desk, I come back to my notes and see which things are moving me or pulling me, and I'll move forward with it as much as I can, and if it doesn't feel finished, I leave it until I have another free moment. I don't find myself feeling stuck often and I think it's because my life is so full right now being a mom of young kids. We're just pulled in all kinds of different directions. And the problem most often arises from feeling pulled in too many different directions. So I've found, my solution is to only answer to 'one' as often as I can. And when I answer to one, and I answer to the one that feels most important—whether it's an idea, a story, or being in the park with my kids—then I'm happiest.

**Do you want to make your full living off of your art, or do you think capitalism is incompatible with creativity?**

I am not a total radical. I think that capitalism and creativity can be bedfellows. I think that, in fact, there has been a lot of great art under capitalism. I personally pursued marketing as a profession because I think I have a knack for it, in a way. You know, my brain works with the mechanisms of growth, economically. And it's a little bit embarrassing to admit that as a person who makes art because I think that's not very cool, you know?

Having a day job makes me feel safe, and when I feel safe, I make better art, and I have better sex. So I don't think that they're incompatible. But what I had to, for a long time, work on these other barriers that get in the way, like the people pleasing. I put authority figures in that category of people to please. And that is something that can get in the way of a lot of people in the capitalist structure that we're in, is that we have grown up, especially in the US, to think that, like, bosses deserve their authority. That bosses are smarter, and better, and worked harder, and thus they're people that we should look up to. And Joe's been helpful with me because in England, they don't think that way. Because of the class structure, they just inherently understand that things aren't fair, and that people with power often times don't deserve it. And that gives them a lot more

comfort with kind of being themselves in a way that I hadn't had. And I think a lot of Americans might relate, too. You look at people with money, and you think, "wow, they must've done something, man." Which isn't really often the truth. And wealth isn't something to look up to. So it's taken me a long time to work that out.

I have a job that is flexible, and I've always prioritized that. Before Covid made it a lot more common, I looked for work that was flexible, where I knew that I could get my job done at 8 pm after my kids fell asleep if I didn't get all of it done during the day because I had a wild idea that I wanted to pursue for two hours that took away from some of my work. So right now, I'm having a hard time with this because I'm feeling so much more pulled to creative work than ever, and I could really put way more time into my creative work than ever because things just keep coming to me. And yet I think about what happened when I became a mom—and my attention was pulled in even more directions—I became more productive. This is a common parenting experience. With limited resources, you really stretch them. And so I feel so good right now at budgeting my time, making the most of it, and not wasting my time. So I don't know. Would getting rid of my day job mean that I felt less safe, and thus that would make worse work? And would it mean that with more time, I'd waste more? I really don't know, and I'm not going to make a change, I suppose, until it feels like a must or necessity.

**What has surprised you the most about happy endings and your art in general?**

Do you know? What's surprised me the most about Happy Endings, and starting to make my art, is that people want it. It's funny. I'm not a person who lacks confidence by any means but you still can't really know for sure if your work is going to resonate with somebody until you really do it. You can think "oh maybe somebody will like this" but yeah, getting reactions from strangers, having strangers you've never talked with who aren't even commenting and liking your posts, just pay 60 bucks to subscribe to you for a whole year, like take that leap of commitment financially, is still bonkers to me. And I don't know if it'll ever stop surprising me. I'm less surprised that somebody cared, or that it made a difference in somebody's life, because I think the odds are that that would happen, you know? Even walking down the street and smiling at a stranger and seeing them smile back. Like, I've had that happen enough in life to know that there are ripple effects of the exchange of connection, I suppose. But just that it happened, and it's sustaining, and that it's growing, and that it's a mass of people, it feels very surprising, and cool.

**What is your relationship to the online world?**

I think that the internet is really awesome. I'm glad it exists. The best part of life is obviously the in-person world, because it's the realest thing, and it's where we are. But the online world is an incredible opportunity that humanity has right now to connect and to spread messages. I think that it comes with a little baggage, as every opportunity does, and yet I can't help myself from feeling so hopeful and optimistic still. Like, I met Joe on an app. I think that apps are awesome, but they're all tools. I think that we have a tendency to think that tools are somehow something to put on a pedestal instead of remembering that humans are on the pedestal and that tools are things we can use. And that, in the same way that when people get super invested in anything, whether it be yoga or kombucha, and you think like "oh kombucha fucking saved my life," now it's on a pedestal. Or "I'm so addicted to yoga, I love yoga"... I mean, I get it, I like kombucha and yoga too. But no one tool is ever the end all be all. It's something that you can use to pursue the end all be all, you know? So if you think that a dating app is going to be your solution, you're wrong. It's a tool you can use to find your solution.

The internet and social media are the same. I like social media. I think it's a fun tool to explore my self-expression, to connect with other people, to educate and entertain myself with. But I'm never going to sit there and spend endless amounts of time. I just don't have the time, period. But I think it's fun. And sometimes I let other people's ideas infest me for a minute, you know? It's really en vogue to hate on phones and to hate on the internet and to say like "oh you're spending too much time on social media," and so then I'll think "oh god, I don't want my kids to see screens," and "oh god I should maybe stop using Instagram so much." But I try to live by the "moderation in all things" idea. I don't want to deprive myself of anything that I find goodness in. So yeah, I think it's fucking fun. I mean on Instagram, people are showing how creative and ingenious you can be with this form of entertainment and education. It's amazing the kinds of shit people are putting out there. It's honestly so inspiring. And it is up to you, as the end consumer, to decide how you use this tool and decide how it serves you. And if you find some value in it, lean into that value within whatever boundaries feel good to

you. So yeah, I love the internet. I love the online world. But fortunately for me I have a pretty good sense of boundaries with my time because I really value it.

**You've worked on having boundaries.**

Yeah. I do think it's an important thing to help your family learn, too. There weren't a lot of things that we had boundaries for at home. Like my dad never limited the amount of time we had with TV or anything. And yet, I just think that you learn it by the models around you. And my dad likes TV and my sister likes TV. They'll enjoy it shamelessly. And I think that the shame of boundaries sometimes can feed into the shame of the thing itself, and that makes you feel bad about it.

**Abigail, what is your be all end all?**

Love!

**Favorite Happy Endings essays?**

Hot Potatoes and Married couples have more sex, so why does our culture think the opposite?

**Abigail Mlinar Burns recommends:**

Crying

Swimming

Watching Dating Shows: *Love is Blind*, *Naked Attraction*, *The Ultimatum*, *Married at First Sight* - anything Nikki Glaser hosts

Her Spotify playlist on shuffle: Abigail's Playlists

Being massaged

Name

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