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April 12, 2024 -

As told to Mána Taylor, 2508 words.

Tags: Writing, Failure, First attempts, Focus.

On acknowledging the failures on the path to success

Writer and reporter Rachel Monroe discusses learning from artists, finding freedom in restrictions, and trusting her own instincts.

You write "Letter from the Southwest," a column for *The New Yorker*. You're based in Marfa, but report from Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and more. I imagine you're often traveling. Do you like being on the road?

I always prefer to drive. I had an old pickup truck and bought a new hybrid truck when I got this job, because I knew that I was going to want to be on the road, and I like having my own vehicle. I feel a little bit like a turtle. It just fills up with stuff when I'm on a trip. I almost always would prefer to drive than fly.

I am also a person who will go probably an hour out of my way to take the two lane road instead of the highway or something, just because I always like seeing what's out there. My brain churns along as I'm driving, and it's just nice to be in it. There's something about flying that's very disconcerting. You just land somewhere and you're plunged into this new reality.

How has it been going from freelancing to having this current job in which you write for a singular publication?

I think there's a lot of freedom that comes with being a freelancer. It's freedom that comes at a price. It's sort of all up to you. The generating ideas and pitching them and getting all the work done. I was working closely with editors, many of whom were really wonderful, but I felt [that] if I didn't keep it going, it wouldn't keep going, if that makes sense. All the sort of initiating energy I had to come from within.

There's been something about being attached to an institution—especially an institution that I really respect—that has been really relieving and relaxing. And that's the trade-off for slightly less freedom. I started freelancing at *The New Yorker*, I think, in 2017. I've worked with the same editor the whole time. We have a really great relationship.

When I was pondering taking the job, I was afraid of the idea of writing more quickly, and more frequently. I was [also] afraid of being kind of siloed as a Texas writer, if that makes sense. There are a lot of great Texas writers, but there's a lot that I'm interested in that's beyond this state. And one of the things that I like so much about reporting is that it gives me an excuse and the funds to leave.

Honestly, this is why I'm really grateful for this job. There's a lot of freedom in this job too. I think *The New Yorker* is a place that really respects writers. I wasn't hired to fill a position. They're not really doing that. I feel like there's a lot of trust in me and my own instincts, and what am I drawn to, what I want to write about.

I like that you used the word trust. To let someone go on a reporting trip is a special kind of trust. You've written an incredible book on women and crime and you were focused on crime for a while, and now you've expanded your reporting world.

I think earlier in my career, I was really envious of people who had a very clear beat. I write about climate, I write about sports, etc. And I think there are still a lot of writers I admire who are just

deep on a subject and deep and well sourced and knowledgeable. But I've always thought that's not the way that my brain works. I'm just so all over the place and obsessed with one thing, and then once I finish a piece, I'm usually pretty done with it, and then I'm zipping around and obsessed with something else. A couple of years ago I did this piece for Esguire about online sperm donors, and if you met me back then, I would somehow steer the conversation back to sperm. But then you meet me a month later and it would be about fire, or who knows what else.

I really do think that it's important to find a kind of work that suits your own, the way that your brain functions. Rather than trying to fight or discipline your brain to be other than it is. Just to know who you are, how you work, and work with that—instead of putting yourself in a position where you're constantly at war with yourself. I have found myself with a life that allows me to have these serial obsessions that I can go really deep on and then leave behind.

It seems like you have a lot of artist friends, and I'm sure you have journalist friends, but I feel like Marfa is known for being an artist hub as well. I'm curious what your relationship to art is, and also do you consider yourself an artist in some ways?

I love being around artists. I tend to like being around artists and musicians more than I like being around writers. There are many writers who I really love, but if I look at my life and who I'm hanging out with, it's just who my closest friends tend to be. And I think there's something I just really admire about the kind of creativity that I don't have at all.

I think maybe it's easier for me to just exist in admiration and not feel comparison or competition or insecurity or something. I have always found and found it really inspiring to be around people who do things that I'm in such awe of, and it's fun. In Marfa, I can absorb all kinds of gossip about the art world. A lot of it passes through Marfa in one way or another, and I just sort of get to enjoy it. It doesn't make me feel anxious about my own career in any way. I can just be a pure voyeur. So there's pleasure in it in that way.

My dad's really into art, so I grew up with a lot of art around. I think there's something in me that has just always found it stimulating, slightly beyond my grasp.

Are there times that you've started an article that didn't end up going in a direction that you wanted to, and then abandoned it?

I try not to have too many preconceptions at the beginning, so they always go in all sorts of directions. But I've definitely had pieces that have been killed. I think to me, it's very important to talk about it. I wish we could talk about it more because when you're looking at somebody's career from the outside, you only see the things that worked. Right?

That's true.

You don't see the 10 pitches that nobody responded to or said no to. You just see the one that made it through the process intact. I remember talking to a friend of mine who is a journalist and had just gotten a piece killed. She was feeling so much shame about it, and I was like, "Dude, that just happened to me last month. This is so normal." She also didn't have that many friends who were journalists and maybe didn't know how normal it was. It felt like she had failed. And I was like, "No, this is often, it's a failure of the editorial process."

I think it's also really a useful thing to go through because it's made me think much more. It's really useful to have the experience of failure. It makes me, at least, stress-test my ideas and be wary of getting too caught up in that enthusiasm of what something could be and just really force myself to ask, "Do I have the sources? Is this really here?"

I'm grateful for it, and I think everybody should make sure there are kill fees in their contracts so it doesn't become financially ruinous.

I did a piece that was supposed to be for *The New York Times Magazine* about—this was years ago—about vacant row houses in Baltimore. It didn't end up working for *The New York Times Magazine*. In one way, it was too big. I had a hard time wrapping my head around it. It got killed, but then I ended up writing it for *The New Republic*. We sort of edited it way down. It was much clearer and better. Somebody reading that in *The New Republic* would have no idea that it was months of torture.

Definitely. I do think that learning to fail in that way, or even getting rejected, has its own importance.

Otherwise, you feel like you're just guessing or making it up. There's something about getting a no or getting an edit, even a harsh edit, that somehow brings you in touch with reality in a way that I think is really useful. You can always work with reality. You just have to know what the reality is.

Is there something you wish someone had told you when you first started becoming a journalist?

It took me a long time to figure out how to trust my own observations and reactions and instincts, because I didn't go to journalism school. I think if I could go back and talk to myself, I think I would just give myself that permission in a way.

Writing nonfiction is so scary because you're sort of describing what you see, your perspective, even if you're trying to do the most objective newsy thing in the world, your perspective is always there. Who do you choose to talk to? What do you choose to include or not include? And that was very hard for me for a long time.

I think just the whole point of it, if somebody's asking you to write something or publishing something that you're writing, they are investing in your perspective. They want to hear from you. I think I spent a long time trying to sound like what I thought a journalist was. I think that was the problem with that piece that didn't work for *The New York Times Magazine* is I was trying to sound like a *New York Times Magazine* writer, instead of just trying to trust myself.

It's hard to do, but trusting your own instincts and your own perspective and your own perceptions, and finding the right partnerships for that—if that makes sense—finding the editor who gets you, finding the publication that's interested, not trying to totally rewrite or reshape what you've done, but where that kind of alignment is... That's where my best work has come out of. And so I think just being on the lookout for that and finding that. Once you find it, hold onto it.

One of my favorite pieces you wrote last year was a difficult one about your relationship to guns and how that's changed. It was surprising because I felt like it was one of the most personal things I've read of yours, but in a really beautiful way. It can also be scary to write personal essays because it's your own life on the page.

I wrote a couple non-fiction pieces for the *Believer* and for the dear departed *Awl*, and I've been thinking about how nice it would be to get back to that. I think in some ways those more personal pieces came out of, on the one hand, my fear of, or my insecurity maybe of, "I'm not a reporter. I didn't go to journalism school. Who's going to pay me to go to the Trump rally and write about that? That's for a real reporter."

Now that I feel more confident in that realm, I think I've become, in some ways, more timid writing about myself. But I miss it. It's also, that's a very slow kind of writing for me to really think and reflect and sort of try to accurately capture it. So it's hard for me to prioritize it. That was a gratifying thing about writing that gun essay is getting back into that mode of slowing down and finding something where that's not driven by a narrative. The momentum of it isn't necessarily a narrative, it's a progression of an idea or an emotion, or circling around something and seeing it from different angles. It's a richer, slower process for me.

Definitely. It's only recently that I'm really trusting in the slow process. It's easy to be caught up in what older people ahead of you have accomplished. It's through a slow process of, like you were saying, finding your editor, finding your voice.

I didn't really start doing this kind of writing until I was almost 30. I do think it's harder now. I was sort of insulated from the careerist aspects of it, partially because all my friends were artists and musicians and theater people. I didn't even know enough to sort of have the sense that, "Oh, no, I'm behind. I need to be pitching." I had no idea, I didn't know about any of it. And so yeah, that feeling of being behind, I think can be really insidious. But, if you're on your own path, you're never behind. Easier said than that.

I have the same impulses in me as everybody else. I'm always measuring against whoever there's around to measure against. It's just about protecting the part of you that knows what it's interested in and loves the work for the work's sake. And that has nothing to do with careerism. It's just finding a way to protect and nurture that part and keep feeding and watering it.

Rachel Monroe recommends:

Marion Milner, *A Life of One's Own* & *On Not Being Able to Paint*. Marion Milner was the pen name of Joanna Field, a midcentury feminist and psychoanalyst. These books were recommended to me when I was in my twenties by my therapist, and I still return to them. They're books about what it feels like to think and create and exist in the world - the glory and the struggle of all that dailiness.

Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness*. A German journalist visits the commandant of Treblinka in prison, where he attempts to explain and exonerate himself, and she wrestles with her own pity and disgust. One of the great books about what it feels like to be a reporter (although it's usually not QUITE this intense).

Liberty Puzzles. This Boulder-based company sells amazing wooden jigsaw puzzles that make every cardboard puzzle just feel like trash. Perfect when you want to mute your brain for a little while and not look at a screen.

My Own Private Idaho. Just rewatched this for probably the tenth time. A shaggy, rambling movie held together by River Phoenix's tender, intense charisma.

Going for a walk. It makes almost everything better!

Name

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Vocation

writer and reporter

Fact

Willy Somma

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