On knowing your calling

Writer Emerson Whitney discusses harnessing the joy in your creative work, why one should engage politically as a public figure, and the power of words.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2460 words.

Tags: Writing, Beginnings, Identity, Money.

Your two most recent titles, *Daddy Boy* and *Heaven*, are prose, and you released a poetry collection before that. How have you maintained a relationship with poetry as you focus more on prose?

I'm such a passionate maker of images with words, and my relationship with poetry is inseparable from that commitment. I can't think of myself as anything other than a poet. I love the capacity for the full line to do similar things to what verse does. I feel most connected to my own work when I'm doing those kinds of experiments within the full line on a page, like a full sentence. Enjambment is one of my favorite things in the whole world, and that's really connected to verse, but I love trying to make those same kinds of things happen in a sentence.

It sounds like, to you, prose and poetry are on a continuum.

Absolutely. There's a lot more gray than is talked about. When we get so oriented toward genre, it does feel as if there might be a binary between prose and poetry, and I really connect with the spaces in between.

How did you know you would become a writer?

My grandma would tell you that I was making poems when I was three, which seems a little early, but it's probably true. Honestly, I think there's really nothing else to me besides this. There wasn't anything else I was supposed to do. I entered this material reality with a commitment to writing things down, and it has stayed. There was no point in my life that I was wanting to do absolutely anything else at all. Even now, anything that comes up in my day that isn't writing, I'm always like, "No." I went to the bank this morning, and I was like, "I can't go to the bank. I need to be doing something with words." But I did. I went to the bank.

What you were saying about starting to write early reminds me of, I was starting to write before I could speak. I was one year old when this was happening, and to people who are neurotypical, that's weird, but to people who aren't neurotypical, like you and I, it's par for the course.

I agree with that 100%. There's a really serious connection between my writing and my neuro-atypicality, or neurodivergence, or whatever we want to use as a word for that. It's definitely that. I have a very serious focus on one thing, and I love that about how my brain works, but sometimes, the wider world interrupts the flow of that in ways that are kind of funny and interesting.

Recently, you've been working in memoir, and that's required you to be forthright about your previous experiences, especially pertaining to your family and how you were raised. To what extent is protecting the privacy, reputation, and emotions of those you write about a part of your creative process?

I think about this a lot. I just came back yesterday from recording the audiobook of *Daddy Boy* for the last few

days, so I got to hear it in my own head, and out loud, and through the lens of the person editing the audio. It really resonated with me, what I did with the people in this particular book, and how I try to be really conscious of my impact when I'm doing anything. At the same time. I've had to be committed to the permissiveness that allows me to say the things I've experienced that relate to the thematics I'm working with, even if, to some extent, some folks would prefer that I didn't.

With *Daddy Boy*, I'm treading on thinner ice than I was with *Heaven*. It feels like, to me, a book that was a little bit less careful. I'm so protective of my mom, and *Heaven* is so much about her, and I really have such a nuanced perspective on her [and] how she inhabits the world, and I deeply hope I have the same kind of thoughtfulness about everyone who's in *Daddy Boy*. But a lot of it is about my ex. I sound different when I'm writing about people that are more in my life recently than I did when I was collecting childhood memories about people. I find that really interesting.

One of the coolest things about autobiography is that people can see the parts of me that I can't when I do something like this. When I write like this it's an amazing process. It's so exposing, so vulnerable. Sometimes, when I'm done, I'm like, "What in the world did I do?" But as a standard practice, I try to offer [a red pen] to people that are in the text first. Historically, my family has been like, "Do whatever."

Part of why *Daddy Boy* feels more delicate in this way is that I didn't want to share it with my family and the people in it because there's sex, there's kink in there, and I don't want my brothers to engage with this so much. Luckily, they didn't want to either, so that works out for me. That part of it is particularly interesting to me right now. I haven't thought of this particular angle of that nuance yet.

I noticed on your Instagram bio that you list not just that you're trans and disabled, but also your ethnicity and class. I don't see class listed on too many people's bios. Why does it feel important to you, as a creative person with a following, to illuminate so many corners of your identity?

I actually just took that down because I was like, "It's too wordy," but I think about this all the time. What I was thinking as I was coming back from the audiobook thing yesterday was…instead of having it as a line in there, I want to make multiple posts about each of those traits I'd named. I was starting to feel like the words aren't enough and the amount of characters I'm allowed to use in there isn't enough. What I'm always trying to illustrate is complexity, and complexity regarding identity.

I come from a mixed-class background. My immediate family is working class, my mom was working class, and her parents are more middle class. That, combined with being racialized as white and experiencing the world without colorism on my body, or race and racism projected onto me, I have so many places of access that are probably beyond my own comprehension. As someone who writes about those things, I feel it's my responsibility to talk about where exactly I'm coming from.

I'm interested in your thinking about making individual posts about this. Do you consider a social media post to be a form of creativity? I ask because it's so easy to see it as marketing.

I do honestly think of it as a place where I can connect with other people. There are people on there—I know their little picture and the name they have on Instagram—that have been following my work for a while, and I want to talk to those folks, for the most part. I see it as marketing for sure, and I learn a lot from people who are close to me who have interacted with social media for way longer than me.

I have a weird relationship with it in the sense of, one of my good friends who's a Libra—I feel like the Libras in my life know how to use Instagram in a way that I never have—always says I do it so weird. And I agree. There's something about the fabric of exposition that can happen on social media that's kind of cool. As somebody who does work with the subjective eye, I can use it in that way. Sometimes, I really do try to, but more so, I feel like it's a way that I don't have to play telephone through other forms of media to talk to people who are trying to connect with me.

Your bio, when you did have your class in there, said "working/now middle. Has your writing allowed you to expand

your income? If so, how have you learned to make a living from your creativity?

Yes, it has. I either make $62,000 or $63,000 a year. I forget which one it is. I'm horrible at numbers. I have dyscalculia so seriously [that] any numerical value is lost to me very quickly. It's my salary for teaching at Goddard College, which I love and am quite indebted to. My whole time up until now, I made a really strange amount of money [as an adjunct professor]. This is definitely the most I've ever made. And then, I got a royalty check for *Heaven* for $500 a few weeks ago, which is cool.

At the same time, when we're talking about social media or money, it's such a fraught space in the sense that I don't think there's anything more important for us to be talking about than class. And by class, what I mean is, I try to follow the money. I was just talking about this with some folks the other night, and it's so hard, because we still really aren't comfortable saying, on our bios, our marginalizations. How we distill our class experiences into those kinds of one-liners is… I don't even know if we've interrogated that. But there's no doubt in my mind that one of the ways to survive some of the more politicized aspects of my being is by uniting people around class. It feels really essential. I want to invite folks to do that more and just be like, "This is what I make. This is where I live."

I live on a land reparations project in so-called Maine. It's on Passamaquoddy and Penobscot territory. And one of my childhood friends is Passamaquoddy, so this was a collaboration between myself, him, and another good friend of mine who is more money-oriented than me. We tried to do a give-back, using me as the fulcrum for it, because as a person racialized as white, I could get a better loan and do stuff like that.

You mentioned your work at Goddard College. What do you get for your own creativity when you teach others?

I love Goddard so much because its model is more like coaching. I went there as a student and it was, I think, my seventh college. There was no way I was going to graduate ever because—I'm starting to talk more about this—I was put in special ed when I was 11. I'm a spectrum person. Also, I have Ehlers-Danlos, which means I have a lot of material physiological disability, combined with…neurodivergence. Goddard was the place that allowed me to feel aligned as, also, a trans person going somewhere where there was a whole house of trans people that I could hang out with and learn from as colleagues, as fellow students.

It changed my life, so being there as a faculty member means a lot more to me than I can ever say. It gave me the shot I needed to really have the fullest expression of life that I believe is possible for me. Teaching there, quote unquote, "we're a horizontal learning community." The hope is that it's a place where I'm sharing my resources and my experience, especially in publishing and writing, but also, I'm totally a learner, and I'm blown away constantly by how badass my students are and what they're up to. Everyone is just so amazing there. I feel really grateful for it.

I certainly am pumped about the possibilities for unlearning, which, I want to look more into what that actually means. I'm sure that's a term that's probably being co-opted in weird ways. I like the fact that we spend our time in a learning community, versus considering my students as a glass that's empty that I'm filling with stuff. That's not what's happening. It makes my life particularly vibrant to be part of.

At the risk of asking a question that's too intrusive, how have changes in your ability resulting from Ehlers-Danlos shaped your creative process over time?

It is huge. I'm just in this tremendous kind of surrender that really blows my mind. Where do I even start with that? Questions that are coming to mind include, is our body separate from our creative capacity? How can I undo the story that I have a body, mind, and spirit that are separate? That's a colonizer framework. I'm also thinking about, how do I live in this incarnation, in this exact way, with all this pain and the tremendous pleasure of makership? All these questions are right at the tip of my tongue and right at the top of my list of themes that I churn around all day long.

My mom passed away in August, and these were things that she was reckoning with and didn't survive. As I've been

thinking about so much, I was told right after she passed that I am the most of her that's left in the world. I don't know what better I can do than try to carry us both into happiness. Right now, that means in a wheelchair, and it's awesome.

I think [my mom's passing is] a really important thing to talk about, and I'm getting more comfortable with the idea that I'm absolutely going to be speaking about this as I get ready to go on my book tour, and also as I write, because now, I'm writing a whole project on this exact nexus. It's in tremendous honor of her and what she's done for me. She gave me my life. I've learned so much from her, in her life and in her death.

Emerson Whitney Recommends:

All things Fred Moten, particularly his lectures. His work and his thinking makes my thinking and being more vibrant. His scholarship is invaluable.

Unmasking Autism, I mean, a book about being autistic by a trans person was an ideal read for me.

Wheelchairs from 1-800-wheelchair. The person who helps you size the rigid chairs is also a wheelchair user and is great.

Major! The film about Miss Miss Major Griffin-Gracy. A great way to get to know the history of TGI Justice, Miss Major, and our trans elders who continue to make life worth living.

Serendib in Ellsworth, Maine. This shit is so good, Indian and Sri Lankan food by a river.

Name
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Vocation
writer

Emerson Whitney by Char Bataille