

On prioritizing yourself and your work



Writer Enuma Okoro discusses creating space for creativity, knowing when to rest, and giving ideas room to grow.

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As told to Kristen Felicetti, 2828 words.

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What is exciting you creatively these days, or right now?

What is exciting me creatively? I think first of all, it's just recognizing that I have the agency to make the space to delve deeper creatively, and honoring that agency. So in some way I'm answering this question by starting with me. We get to act upon life as well as being acted upon and we can intentionally be making space for creativity to blossom, making space to think, to look, to pay attention. All of those things require active decisions on our part and I don't think we always remember that. But when we make that kind of space, I really think it opens up the creative process in a way that can surprise us.

I'm not sure any writer likes the common question, "Where do you get your ideas from?" But when you're a full-time writer, ideas are your bread and butter. You have to generate a lot of them to keep working. So, since you are a full-time writer, who writes for and pitches multiple outlets, I was really curious about where you get your ideas from.

I primarily just write for the *Financial Times*. And besides doing the column, I'm trying to finish a manuscript, and there are other writing adjacent creative projects I'm involved in right now. But where do I get my ideas from? From life. From all over the place. From reading. I read a ton. From conversations. From when I go on walks and pay attention to the world. From the way I see dogs interact. Walking is an exercise that really spurs ideas for me. I don't understand the process of how that works, but whenever I feel stuck in writing or whenever I need to clear my head, I go on a walk and I'll take notes in my iPhone. I try to walk every day.

My mind is always open and alert because I know that ideas can come from anywhere. I could be in the middle of watching a play and someone says a line and it triggers something in me and I'll stop and make a note in my iPhone. I'm really someone who has learned that when an idea comes to you, even if it's just a snippet, you write it down. Because you always think, "Oh, I'm going to remember this," and you don't. At least I don't.

Sometimes I get ideas from my dreams. There's this liminal space when we first wake up in the morning where we're sort of on the cusp of our waking life and our dream life, where our spirit is really open to receiving in a way that we're not when we're fully awake. And I love that space in the morning. It maybe lasts 15 minutes, but I'm aware when I'm in it. And so sometimes as soon as I get out of it, I will write down the last words I remember from that space, or the last image I had from that space.

I can't think of anything that is not capable of generating ideas. Yeah, so unfortunately my problem is not lack of ideas. It's time. But also I believe that not every idea will prove to be worthy. Sometimes I'll have ideas and I'll write them through, then I realize I can't get any further with them, and I'll sit on them. Then two

years will go by and I will realize, "Oh, wait a minute. Okay, now I see that thread." So I have come back to things like two to three years later and then finished them.

I think you can have the seed of an idea, but I also think you can give that seed time to grow. And that could be anywhere from two weeks to years.

That's good to keep in mind. Sometimes I get frustrated when I have a good idea but some part of it isn't working yet.

The more we experience life, the more we find overlaps, and the more we find connections where maybe we didn't think there could be. And I think that's one of the things I know I try to do with my own work—expose that space where we see more things are connected and affect one another than we had the imagination to see before.

One theme I saw emerge in your Financial Times column was the importance of rest. How do you know when you need rest from your work, and what do you do to take that rest?

One thing is when I can't think clearly anymore. So first there's the physical, when your body feels exhausted, there's that. But another way is when I can't make connections anymore that are clear. My brain just slows down, or it feels like there's so much happening in there that I can't pull one thread. I will stop and I'll go on a walk, or sometimes I'll stop and sit on my couch and kind of look into space, or stare outside for a while. I do a lot of staring at the sky. I love watching the clouds move at their snail pace. And as I move through different cities in the world, I love watching the sky, because it looks different in different cities, and the light looks different, and the clouds move differently and they have different shapes. And so staring out into the sky is really restful for me.

Sometimes I'll take a nap. But something I've realized also about rest is rest isn't always about being motionless or being still, or sleeping. I think rest can be whatever it is that recharges you. So rest could be going to a museum and looking at paintings. Rest could be going for a walk. Rest could be having a conversation with that one friend who really re-energizes you, or makes you laugh.

In different seasons of my life I have a practice where I will wake up in the morning—especially when I feel like there's so much going on in my life or I have a zillion deadlines or whatever it is—I'll wake up in the morning, or I'll stop at my desk when I'm in the middle of working on something, and I'll put my hand on my heart and I'll take a deep breath and I will ask myself, "What do you need? What do you need right now?" And then I'm quiet and I try to listen. I try to listen to my body, and I try to listen to my spirit. And then if I'm able to, I give myself what I need.

I love that. You mentioned travel and different cities, and I saw an Instagram post of yours where you wrote, "Travel is its own art." That quote could be a jumping off point for a million different questions, but I'll just start with what does that mean to you, travel is its own art?

Oh, it means a lot of things. One of the things that it means to me is giving yourself the freedom to rediscover or discover new parts of yourself. For me, different cities have always had the ability to tap into different parts of who I am. And as I learn to pay attention to that, it also means I'm learning to pay attention to how space and place affects the way that I think, affects the way I imagine myself in the world, and affects the way I engage with others. Physical space has a deep effect on psychic space. And I think there's certain spaces that we can find ourselves psychically limited, and there's certain spaces that we can find more of a psychic freedom. I have learned, and I'm continuing to learn, to tap into what that means for me as a creative person, what that means as a thinking person, what that means as a woman, what that means as a Black woman moving through the world.

And that doesn't always mean getting up and getting on a plane and going to a different city. There are places even in the city we live in where we can figure out, "Okay, wow. This is interesting. This is a physical space in which my imagination feels like it has more space to think and to expand." Or this is a space in which I feel, "Oh my goodness, I can breathe a little better, or wider here." "This is a space where if I'm here for 15 minutes, I have the opportunity to gather pieces of myself back together."

So travel to me doesn't have to mean traveling long distance. Traveling is just going from one place to another. But I am really interested in how physical movement affects psychic movement and creativity.

You've written for esteemed publications and traveled to amazing places. Some people might see that and be like, "Oh wow, she's really made it." But the reality is that almost all writers, no matter how big, are facing rejections and disappointments. How do you deal with rejection?

That's a really good question for me to think about. There's some rejections where it's like, "Oh, I was just throwing my name in the hat anyway." And sometimes there's the relief, "Oh, actually thanks. Because I don't know if I would've even had the time to write that piece." So it depends on where the rejection is coming from. But for the rejections where my heart was in it, there's definitely that moment of disappointment and sadness.

Who likes rejection? Nobody likes rejection, but I don't sit on rejection, because to me that takes energy away from continuing to be creative. If we sit with rejection too long, we have the tendency to then make it about ourselves and not about the work. And that's an important thing to remember as well, that as a writer, as a creative, these rejections that we receive, they're not rejections of us. We have to constantly find a way to separate the work that we do and how we create from a sense of self.

I do think that's important, no matter how much we love being writers, or artists, or creatives, or doctors, or whatever it is that we do, and I think for artists, at least I can say for myself, as a creative, so much of the work that we do is really wrapped up in who we are. But I cannot put all my worth or all my sense of self in the work that I do, no matter how much I love being a writer, or how intrinsic it is to who I am. As Enuma, as a spiritual being embodied in this beautiful body, there's so much more to me.

And so with rejection, it's normal and healthy to be disappointed and be sad and to think, "Oh, I wonder if I could have done this better?" But then I also think it's really important to keep it moving and to realize you can try again, and to also trust the unfolding of your life. That's another thing, too. Sometimes rejections are a blessing and you don't even know it.

You're also working on a novel. That's such a different type of writing than journalism or writing for a speaking gig. When most of your day is writing, how do you pivot to that different type of writing?

It's so hard. As you know, writing a novel is so all-consuming. Because first of all, you're creating a world from scratch in some respects, and you have to enter that world and live in that world. And it's really hard to do that while also trying to move around in* this* world. Ideally I would have large expanses of undisturbed space and time. Weeks at a time or months at a time. But the nature of my life, that isn't realistic.

I try to just grab pockets of time. It could be that I'm working on fiction for two hours in the morning, right before the world wakes up. Because I think that writing fiction, in my experience, it taps into a different part of my interiority than writing non-fiction. So writing fiction when the world is still asleep in the early morning, I feel like I have more access to deeper layers. But sometimes I will snatch an hour wherever I can find it. I'll be aware of the kind of writing I'm doing on the novel. It could be that I'm reviewing a chapter, and I know I can do that within an hour between other things.

I am learning now that we rarely have our ideal conditions. We just learn how to make the best use of the time and the space we have. And so I recognize that, but I'm also learning to look at the months ahead and think, "Okay, based on the decisions I make now, the things I say yes or no to, where can I block off larger stints of time in order to do this?" And it also means putting some of your other life on hold. It means being less social, and it means not having those phone conversations with a friend, because that takes me out of the head space I'm in, or it means not going to those dinners.

Because so much of my... not so much, all of my working life is essentially writing. I've learned that there's so many other side things that on the outside you may not think are related to the writing process, but they are. So

knowing that if this is a week in which I have to finish a big essay or a chapter, I cannot go out in the evenings and come back late at night and go straight to bed and wake up the next day. Even the evenings when I'm not working, I recognize I really need to get to bed on a certain time to have a clear head in the morning in order to do this.

That totally resonates with me. When you're an artist or a writer, you need to have both the time to make the work and the mental space for it. And sometimes that really means you have to say no to some things in a way that maybe people that don't do that stuff don't 100% understand.

Yeah, and I've stopped apologizing for that too, or explaining myself. Because I used to really feel like I had to explain, "No, I can't get together because I'm doing this." And now sometimes I just say, "I'm busy. I already have other plans," because my other plans are me. And that is just as valid. Or my other plans are making sure I get enough sleep so I can write in the morning.

I don't know if we ever feel like our work is good, regardless of how it's received, but I know that to try to make good work there are ways in which I have to put myself first and to put the work first. And like you said, not everyone will understand that, especially people who don't work the same way. But I know that for me, there are ways that I try to politely communicate what I'm capable of and what I'm not capable of, without feeling I need to apologize or explain myself, and I can't always stop to think how people will respond to that. We're all funny people, and we all walk around with our triggers and our wounds and our baggage, and there are things that I may say to you that would trigger you that I have no idea about because I don't share your history.

So I think the important thing is just always knowing that the people who care about you and who you care about in your life, that space can be made to have these conversations. But I'm going off a little bit. Basically just honor what the work needs and what you need.

Enuma Okoro Recommends:

Engaging with art and reading my weekend column, "[The Art of Life](#)" in the *Financial Times Life & Arts* newspaper

Reading bell hooks' book, [All About Love](#), and Audre Lorde's essay collection, [Sister Outsider](#)

Natalie Merchant's song, "[Kind and Generous](#)" from her 1998 album *Ophelia*. A gorgeous simple song about being grateful. It could apply to anything and listening to it is always a beautiful reminder of the gift of being alive and the miraculous and quotidian things I often just take for granted.

A daily meditation practice, even if it's just 15 minutes of sitting in silence and re-centering.

Asking for what you want

Name

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Vocation

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