

February 15, 2019 -

As told to Kristen Felicetti, 3113 words.

Tags: Writing, Creative anxiety, Adversity, Mental health, Independence.



On working with limitations

Writer Esmé Weijun Wang on the social and artistic benefits of a writer's group, building a strong reading foundation, and re-envisioning what it means to leave a legacy.

Something that you speak a lot about is being an ambitious person living with limitations. What kind of routines or practices are you engaging with lately to both balance the many things you want to get done, while making sure you're still taking care of yourself?

So today is an unusual day in that I met with a friend this morning, and we're co-working at The Wing San Francisco. It is unusual that I'm here, because I normally work at home in bed because that's easiest for me as someone with a lot of physical limitations. [Wang lives with late-stage Lyme disease.] The person I'm working with today is a friend named Laura, who is also a writer and a journalist.

There have been many times when we've arranged to work here, and I've gotten here after a long trip via public transit, and then I've left after 20 minutes because I'm not feeling well. Or we've made plans to meet here and then I've had to cancel about 30 minutes before we're supposed to meet because, again, I'm not feeling well. It's been a special morning in that we made plans to meet here at 9:00 a.m., I got here at about 8:15, and it's 11:30 now and I've been working here all morning. That's an example of a day in which I'm feeling particularly strong and I've been able to get more work done.

I think that speaks to how unpredictable living with physical limitations can be. It's not just the physical limitations, either. It can also apply to mental illness. If I'm having a day that's really tough, with different kinds of mental illness, whether it's the schizoaffective disorder that I live with, or various issues with anxiety disorders, those can be limiting as well. So I try my best everyday. As you said, I do consider myself an ambitious person living with limitations, but those hopes for my days do exist within the boundaries that are created by my limitations.

So I'm gonna confess, I've known about your work since the days of LiveJournal, and your zine *Vitaphobia*. How has online community impacted your life and your work from those very early days until now?

Well, first of all, I am very honored. It always delights me to hear when people have been following my stuff for a long time. *Vitaphobia* was certainly a while ago, but I think that zines, as well as online communities, have always been a way for me to transcend different kinds of limitations. I think the idea of limitations has followed me throughout my life. Zines were a way for me to transcend living in a mostly white, very small town when I was a teenager.

That was a way for me to learn about riot grrrl and queer politics and things that I wouldn't have learned about just living in my town. Similarly, being online and the communities I was a part of in LiveJournal allowed me to feel less alone when I was in high school and college. When I started to live in a bigger community at Yale, I had access to more people, but not necessarily a more diverse set of people. And then online communities via Twitter and other forms of social media became important to me when I started to get really sick and it became difficult for me to leave my house.

Once I became fairly disabled, online communities were a way for me to not be completely solitary. They

were a way for me to continue to make connections and form friendships. So yeah, I've always found other ways besides IRL friendships to meet other people and make those connections.

I think your Twitter also has an authentically positive and encouraging tone, which is refreshing, because often Twitter defaults to cynicism or sarcasm. I wanted to ask about your relationship with social media and the decisions you make about what kind of stuff to put out there.

I feel like my relationship to Twitter in particular is very complicated. As I said, I feel like Twitter has been a way for me to feel less alone and to make connections with people that I wouldn't otherwise have the chance to meet. For example, I live in San Francisco, and while there is a literary community in San Francisco, it definitely is not the same as living in New York. And so before my first book, *The Border of Paradise*, was published, I started to form connections and make friends with people in New York, and in the literary scene in New York, which really helped when the book came out.

But in terms of the tone that I tend to take with Twitter, I do try to be as positive as I can, without being fake or false. I think that natural inclination occurs because I see that there is so much cynicism occurring on Twitter already. I don't need to add to that. So for example, if I see a lot of people tweeting about something horrible that has happened in the news, I won't ignore it, but I would prefer to tweet something that people can do to help the situation other than just tweeting more depressing stuff about what has just happened. Such as somewhere you can donate or things like that.

I also like to do these good morning tweets. I'm not exactly sure how that started. I know that Lin-Manuel Miranda does a similar thing, and I quite admire him. But I don't know how mine started. I think it often happens that the things that I tweet or share on social media are things that I want to hear. I often just say the things that I want to hear, so I'll go online and think, "What do I need to hear today?" And then that'll be the thing that I share on that particular day.

That's also how my "beautiful things" thread started. That is a thread that I started a couple of years ago that is just a long list of beautiful things. And one might think that thread happens because I'm happy and thinking about all of the beautiful things in the world, but actually it's the complete opposite. Those tweets happen because I'm feeling really bad, and I want to remind myself of beautiful things in the world.

On Yahdon Israel's show, you talked about how in your novel, *The Border of Paradise*, you wanted to write about mental illness in a way you'd never seen before. I think *The Collected Schizophrenias* has a similar aim, but since it's a non-fiction book, there are concrete actions that could result from people reading it. Your book could start a discussion with psychiatrists or policy makers to potentially rethink or even change some of the issues your essays address, such as involuntary hospitalization, or how universities support students with mental illness. Was that one of your goals with the book, and have those conversations already started to happen?

One thing that I've found in writing the book is that it ended up bringing up more questions than answers for me. By the end of the book, I found that I had, in effect, opened up a real Pandora's box in terms of questions about the schizophrenias. When I bring up involuntary hospitalization or the ways that colleges and universities treat people with mental illness, I don't offer answers or advice in the book. I'm mostly bringing up questions.

In terms of whether these conversations are already happening, the one thing that I thought of when you asked that question was the outcome of *The Sewanee Review* reprint of "Yale Will Not Save You." I was actually extremely surprised by that. I knew that a couple of reprints of various essays in the book were coming out prior to the publication, because that's how promotion of the book happens, and "Yale Will Not Save You" was reprinted in *The Sewanee Review*, but it ended up becoming way more popular than I had anticipated.

Something that happened, in addition to the actress Emma Roberts sharing it on her Instagram story, was *The New Haven Register* writing a piece about it in their newspaper. They brought up some incidents that had happened more recently with Yale and their students who had, I believe, sued the school, as well as a rating the school had received in regards to the way they treat their students with mental illness. Apparently, Yale had received an F for their treatment of those students.

So yeah, these topics were being brought up in ways that went beyond what my essay could offer. I don't know if anything directly is going to happen because of my essay or *The New Haven Register's* article, but it's possible that people might start talking at Yale or in New Haven or at other schools around the country, which would be nice.

I know you're part of a writing group of other writers. Many of them have also published books recently. Can you talk a little bit about how that group formed, as well as how often the group communicates, meets in person, and shares each other's work?

I've been a part of a longstanding writer's group for many years, starting from about 2005 or so, and that writer's group has morphed and changed over the years since then. It has included many successful writers, and has splintered into an East Coast and West Coast contingent. The East Coast contingent includes Tony Tulathimutte and Alice Kim and Jenny Zhang, because the group started at Stanford, where we all met. The West Coast contingent is the part that I'm a part of now. It includes Lydia Kiesling and R.O. Kwon and Rachel Khong and myself and a number of other amazing writers.

Being a part of a writer's group has been an amazing part of my life, both socially and artistically. I find it a way to make being a writer, which is an inherently lonely way of being, less lonely. We meet every month or so, and we workshop one person's work every month. We also get together and socialize. This week, we're singing karaoke, which is something that we do often. Karaoke is also something that I love particularly. It's a wonderful group, and I feel incredibly lucky to be a part of it.

I think that being a part of a writer's group, if it's possible for writers out there, is really helpful. Even if it's virtually, instead of in person, it can be helpful in terms of just talking to one another about things like: What it's like for reviews to come out, preparing for tours, or the experience of a book coming out. There are a lot of things that I've found no other way to get answers about, other than by the writers in my group. Finding out about how agents behave, for example, is something that's hard to learn about if you don't have friends who also have literary agents.

What is something creative you haven't done yet that you'd like to do?

Wow, what a great question. I feel like I would like to try stand-up comedy once before I die. [Laughs] So that's something that I'd like to try to do.

How do you read? Or how do you choose what you read?

I had actually just tweeted a couple of days ago that I'm in a reading rut right now. I'm having a lot of trouble reading, and I'd asked the general public, "What do you do when you're in a reading rut?" I got a lot of really wonderful responses, ranging from read YA, to reread your favorites, to listen to audio books, to just take a break from reading. When I was younger, I was an incredibly idiosyncratic reader. I would go to the library and grab whatever looked good. I didn't have any sense of what was popular or what the classics were. I read all kinds of weird books that were not popular or well known or considered good books. I think that actually did me a great disservice looking back at it.

It wasn't until I went to graduate school that I started to form a better reading foundation. I'm so grateful to the University of Michigan for having a reading exam, because it was due to the reading exam that I started reading books like *Moby Dick* and *Anna Karenina*. It was that foundation that allowed me to feel like I could better understand what had already been written and what kind of writing was possible.

These days, my reading is greatly influenced by my colleagues and peers. It's also greatly influenced, oddly enough, by books that are sent to me, which is new. I'm sent a lot of books to blurb now, but I'm also sent books by people who just want me to read their books, because perhaps I'll talk about them on social media or talk about them in interviews. That's an interesting and new experience, and it also tends to mean that I don't read older books as much as I used to. I would like to get out of this reading rut. One deep, dark secret that is quite embarrassing is that I actually read a lot of kind of garbage-y books, including mysteries and thrillers that are very poorly written, as well as very poorly written self-help books.

On your website, you mention creativity, resilience, and legacy as three of your main focuses. How do you

approach the idea of leaving a creative legacy?

I've been thinking a lot about legacy in the last two years, particularly because of illness and illness leading to musing about mortality. I started to think about legacy as something not only related to having a statue made of you, but also just related to the idea of having an impact. If one can think of legacy as having an impact, one can have an impact at almost any time, including with other people. Interactions are great opportunities to leave a small legacy, to have a small impact.

Actually—to say that everyday interactions are opportunities for small impacts might do a great disservice to everyday interactions, because everyday interactions can actually leave huge impacts. I'm thinking about this story that I shared on Twitter semi-recently that has to do with *The Collected Schizophrenias*. I had gone to my psychiatrist's office and she had just told me that she believed my schizoaffective disorder was medication resistant and treatment resistant, and that I was probably going to live with it for the rest of my life and that there was basically no hope for me in terms of living at a higher level than I was at that point, which was incredibly hard to hear.

I left her office, and I was crying. As I was heading to the elevators, the security guard stopped me and asked me if I was okay. I was just kind of standing there and crying and he said, "What happened?" I told him a very abbreviated version, and he said, "Are you a writer?" There was no reason for him to think that I might be a writer, and of course he didn't know who I was. I just nodded and he said, "Go home and write about it. Go home and write about this. You're going to be okay." That had such an impact on me. In fact, even thinking about it now, I can't help but think that he was probably an angel of some kind. I did find him later and give him a thank-you note that I had written, but then I never saw him again after that. That was an example of something someone did that had an enormous impact on me.

Is there anything else you wanted to mention that's been helpful for your creativity?

I've been rediscovering movement. For years, I was very sick and I felt that I didn't have access to movement anymore. But recently, I've been experimenting with a little bit of dancing, which I feel has really helped. So in the mornings, I'll put on my wireless headphones and dance to one or two songs. I feel that moving my body, and feeling the joy of the music, and the joy of moving my body to the beat kind of gets my juices going and helps me feel ready to get the words down on the page.

Esmé Weijun Wang recommends:

Blue Valentine, directed by Derek Cianfrance, is one of my favorite movies—it came out in the early 2010s, and stars Ryan Gosling and Michelle Williams in two of their greatest roles. It's about love coming together and falling apart, and it's absolutely fucking brutal, in part because of the way Cianfrance filmed the thing; he had the two stars live together in a house, and they had a tiny budget to live off of. They celebrated holidays and birthdays, and they had to argue and fight and take their fake daughter to a play center. I've watched this film so many times, and I've showed it to so many people because I love it so much.

Freshwater, by Akwaeke Emezi, is an extraordinary debut by an extraordinary writer, and I was lucky enough to get to blurb the book before it came out—it's had a very deserving meteoric rise, and I can't wait to read PET, Emezi's forthcoming YA book. I want to read everything they publish.

PenGems pens. These are the only pens I use; they're smooth, delicately inky, and perfect. I use them with the Hi-Tec-C .4 gel refills.

WorkFlowy. It's an app that I use to organize not only my to-dos, but also my life in general. At some point I realized that I needed to be able to have some way to visualize everything in my day-to-day, from my health care to my friends to my business to my literary career. WorkFlowy is how I do that—it's simple, sure, but it's also phenomenally powerful.

Steven Universe. It's a cartoon that's queer and gender fluid and built on a

foundation of a belief in love and goodness. I love it so much—I don't watch much television, but I've watched all of the *Steven Universe* episodes that exist.

Name

Esmé Weijun Wang

Vocation

Writer

Fact

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