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As told to Grashina Gabelmann, 2132 words.

Tags: Writing, Money, Time management, Success, Inspiration, Mental health.

On what we say we want to do versus what we actually do

Writer Nicole Antoinette discusses multi-platform burnout, the concept of enoughness, and prioritizing time wealth over monetary wealth.

What does your creative practice consist of?

I would say writing and space making. I have written books, I have a [Substack newsletter](#) and I host online and in-person retreats. I like to think about how we can create spaces where people can connect over the things they care about. And currently, as a creative who has been self-employed for 15 years, I'm interrogating how creativity can be present in my life without being monetized. I'm taking a long in-depth herbalism course right now, just for fun. And in 2025, the year I turn 40, I'm taking what I'm calling a grown-up gap year. The only work I know for sure I will be doing during that sabbatical is writing on Substack. I'll live off of that income and my savings and I'll see what happens—hopefully I'll learn to garden and will grow some food.

Tell me about your Substack newsletter.

I've been publishing personal essays online since 2007, which feels like a wild amount of time at this point. I've always been really drawn to real-time story sharing so people can be in conversation with those ideas. I've used Blogspot, Wordpress, and various email newsletter platforms. I don't have a memory of myself as someone who wasn't a writer. In high school it was suggested that I could only be a professional writer as a journalist or if I were lucky enough to write a successful novel. But, as I said, I've been self-employed for 15 years now—I basically came up with my own multi-dimensional job.

I was so excited when Substack came along as it really allows you to make an income as a writer. Prior to that I ran a Patreon community for a listener-funded podcast and writing. I closed that down last summer to focus on my Substack.

Doing both was too much?

This could be a much longer story, but I had a mental health crisis last summer. It was a combination of your run-of-the-mill brain chemistry depression and what I have started to think of as "parasocial energetic burnout"—the ramifications of having been so available to many thousands of people on so many platforms for so many years with very personal content.

That in combination with social media, podcasting, and hosting various online groups eventually led me to feeling overexposed. I had to make some changes to feel better, one of which was closing down Patreon; not because I didn't like it, but because I really wanted to clarify, "What do I feel really good about making public and what is just for me?"

I needed to learn to navigate the boundary between honesty and privacy as someone who writes and shares personal stories. I can lead with honesty without feeling I owe people every detail of my existence. So, closing Patreon and quitting social media were part of my effort to reformulate my public practice.

The last year has been about reevaluating for you?

Yeah. What is the purpose of writing? What parts creatively fulfill me? What parts earn me money? How much

am I willing to share with readers, and why? It's helped me realize you can make changes...just because you're known for a certain thing or have been really active on a certain platform doesn't mean you need to keep doing that for even one more second.

I had a lot of fear about making these changes and what it would mean for my income, for promoting my books—but if having less eyes on my work enables me to feel more mental freedom then I'm fine with paying that as the cost of admission.

Making those sort of changes is very brave, de-growth in a culture that wants us to churn out more and more content.

The concept of "enoughness" is something that I think about in all areas of my life. It's really easy to get caught up in what our industry, mainstream culture, or peer group has defined as success. To be honest, I've never wanted a big career, like capital "C" big career. The messaging in a lot of self-help spaces, especially those directed at women, says that if you aren't reaching for these huge goals, you're playing small or are afraid of visibility. And while this might be true and encouraging for some, I want to create things in a way that feels good to me, is aligned with my values, and remains sustainable.

I want to earn enough money to thrive, I don't just want to scrape by, but I also don't want to step on an escalator of perpetual growth leading to the hoarding of wealth.

Enoughness is a great concept to think about in the context of a creative practice...

How often do I write, what is enough? Some people only feel satisfied if they write every day...I don't write everyday. I look for the "point of enoughness" in all these different areas of my life. I think of my business as a sort of a self-employed-writer-artist-model—I'm not an entrepreneur. I'm not looking to grow something that's bigger than me. I'm not looking to hire a bunch of people. Again, not because that's wrong but it's just not what I want.

You have to figure out what fits for you.

A lot of my writing is about exploring your inner wildness and being in an honest conversation with yourself about what fits for you and that's different for everyone. There are no right answers, but that's certainly something I was told, that success must look a certain way, and that lead me to feeling like there's something wrong with me for not wanting what we are all supposed to want.

I can relate to that. You wrote about "time wealth" in one of your newsletters. I'm someone who values time spent with myself or friends way more than monetary wealth, yet it can be challenging to have more time and less money than others.

I once gave an example in my newsletter about an afternoon last winter. I had finished my deadlines for the day and had a free afternoon. A friend going through a hard time randomly called me and we talked for hours. That was my whole afternoon. I felt so grateful for having that time wealth to be there for her.

Time wealth is also something that can be shared with others. You were able to give your struggling friend company and solace through having time.

For years I only measured value in monetary terms. If I'm not producing work that produces money I'm less valued. It's been so helpful to be in dialogue with my Substack community about these topics: "How can we more creatively envision getting needs and desires met outside of Capitalism? If we can reduce the need for as much wage labor, how much more of our time can we put towards more fulfilling things?" Of course there are people in my community who are in an almost opposite situation, who want big careers and have been shamed for their ambition.

It comes at you from all sides.

Again, I'm not interested in the prescriptive, "Well, everyone should live this small life..." It's about being able to question, "What definition of success was sold to me? If I'm in pursuit of it, who does it benefit and why? Who does it oppress and why? What feels like enough for me?" And a lot of the enoughness, if we take it outside of money and into the realm of art or public art practice, has been about ego stuff for me. How much attention feels like enough? How much validation feels like enough?

Did this lead you to quit Instagram?

Yeah. Instagram was the last social media I was using, and it was my biggest platform, meaning it's where I had the largest audience. I really had to check my own ego; realizing part of me didn't want to leave because my following made me feel special. And I can be self-compassionate about this as we all want to feel recognized, but being able to get to the point of: "I don't need exponentially more attention. I don't want exponentially more attention," because that's how I wound up in that deep parasocial energetic burnout last summer.

That's one of the reasons almost everything I do on my Substack is behind a paywall—the limited audience size and only allowing paid subscribers to comment creates a sense of mutuality, reciprocity and respect. And again, sometimes we want growth, and growth isn't a problem but, to me, the problem is unchecked exponential growth for the sake of growth. If "more" is the only thing making us feel good, what happens

when our income, "likes," or followers decrease or stagnate? Tying my self worth to numerical values feels real dicey to me.

I love the use of dicey in this context.

I felt an immense pressure to mine myself for more and more content, and especially as a personal essayist there's a real delicate balance between good sharing and cannibalizing your own life for art.

Where are you currently at with this?

I'm constantly checking in on these feelings because I still have tender spots around this topic. I haven't reached a point where my self-worth isn't attached to these things. If I see fewer "likes" on a Substack letter I've sent out I still feel something, but now I'm consciously trying to orient to a mindset where collecting "likes" is not the purpose of the practice.

What helps you in these moments?

Zooming out to a systems level helps me, and asking myself: "Who benefits when I do that? Who benefits when we can never be satisfied? The Zuckerbergs of this world, the corporations, the algorithms..."

I'm in a combination of unlearning some of this stuff and revisiting things I've always felt to be true for me but that used to make me feel like a weirdo.

Such as?

Such as, "No, I'm actually not going to hide the fact that I don't have big goals." I have what I like to call "soft ambition" and that's actually fine.

I felt immediately drawn to your work when I read that you like to think/write about: "How to close the gap between what I say I want and what I actually do." I know all about that gap and can give myself a hard time for its existence. What have you learned venturing into that gap?

I'm curious about what it would take to close that gap in more areas of my life without being mean to myself, without weaponizing that gap against myself. And I'm not looking for perfection or moral purity because I don't believe in their existence but I'm curious about this big gap and why it's there. For me, part of closing the gap is unlearning my deeply rooted individualism—I've told myself time and time again that I need to close this gap on my own and I'm just bored of that narrative. It's lonely, it mostly doesn't work and if it does work...what's the exhaustive self-exploitative cost? I'm interested being in community with people whose gaps are similar to mine, like doing a project with a friend even if it's via a call or just having people to be in the gap with.

What can create the gap in your experience?

It can be fear. It took me over a decade to write my first book because I was afraid it wasn't going to be good enough. The gap can appear from being overwhelmed, not knowing where to start. It's about being honest with myself about that particular gap's characterization. Sometimes what I say I want is actually something I think I *should* want, and I'm not making progress on it because, real talk, I don't want to do it. So great, if I'm honest about that, then maybe the next step is giving myself permission to say, "This goal is not for me. I'm out. Bye."

To me, being a good friend means spending time together, honesty, vulnerability, showing up for each other, listening to each other, respecting each other, and having fun together. So why would my relationship with myself require anything other than that? And so the better I become at being a good friend to myself, the less the gap makes me feel like I'm failing.

Nicole Antoinette Recommends:

Read: [A Psalm for the Wild-Built](#), by Becky Chambers

Watch: [Homegrown](#) with Jamila Norman

Snack: [Jackson's Sweet Potato Chips](#)

Listen: [Post Capitalism w/ Alnoor Ladha](#)

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