

On giving your work the time it needs



Writer Rax King discusses being honest, editing as excavation, giving yourself the time to understand your work, and putting your money where your mouth is

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As told to Shy Watson, 2573 words.

Tags: Writing, Money, Process, Failure, Success, Day jobs.

What, to you, makes a good personal essay?

I think it's important for a personal essay to have an honest viewpoint. I feel like a lot of bad personal essays that I read tend to make the speaker out to be especially virtuous, or more victimized than is necessary. There's a lot of personal essays where the whole story is, "I was victimized by something completely out of my control. Here is what happened to me." And there's really not even that much of the narrator in it. It's almost like a report, where something terrible happens to someone who didn't deserve it. And that's an important thing to write for yourself maybe, but it doesn't make for good reading.

I was surprised by how tender and sincere your essays were. Someone left a comment on your Patreon which read, "You always get to the underlying core, and it's brilliant every time." I agree. How do you succeed in this?

I wish I knew. I guess I just spend a lot of time in my own head. Pretty much everything I write for Patreon is roughly the same form; it's like first-person critical, but still personal-type writing. And so, I just have to spend a whole lot of time in my own head deciding what I really think about something. Because I feel like the danger with that kind of writing is, you end up with a silly, haughty op-ed.

What I really want is to find something that I'm interested in, obviously, and then to decide what the real story is in there. Because even when I'm writing about something like the history of Home-EC, I don't want to just write a straightforward history, and I don't want to opine too much. I want to try and find the core of what that history was, why it's meaningful to me, and ideally meaningful to other people, and write from there.

Do you think of humor as a literary device?

Yeah, definitely. And I think it's a really hard one to use successfully. It's so hard to even be funny in person, in a conversation, when the other person has a chance to understand that you're joking in real time. In a lot of literature, there are these unsuccessful attempts to be witty and quippy and Oscar Wilde-like, in a way that just completely flattens on the page. It's unfunny in an uncomfortable way. And I wish I knew the secret to avoiding that. I really don't, but I try.

How do you edit your own work? What happens after you finish the first draft?

The first draft is always just word vomit. It's an excavation project, more than anything else. I teach classes for Catapult on the craft of the personal essay. And one big note I always have when we talk about drafting is,

Don't try to do a good job. Don't be precious about it. Do your best not to edit in real time. I'm always catching myself; I'll type a sentence, and then I'll think of a better word for that sentence, and I'll go back and fix it. And then, it just takes hours and hours, and I'm not really getting anywhere.

In order to end up with anything you can use, you have to excavate a whole bunch of stuff you can't use, and get it all out of your system, and then go back later and chip away at all the terrible stuff that you've uncovered, and find the things that go together, ideas that go together, and motifs that feel like they keep coming up; and then, reassemble a piece of writing that way. That's also what I do for my own stuff.

And that's, I think, partly why all the essays in my book are kind of a hodgepodge. Nothing is straightforward cultural criticism, and nothing is a straightforward personal essay, either. It's all pretty blended together. And I think that is probably a function of how, in the course of writing every one of those essays, I had to start out with 7,000 words of drivel, and then go back and find things that stuck with me, and put those together.

I like how the structure of your essays, there's usually two or three threads that seem to interweave throughout. How do you manage to structure that flow so well?

I don't know how I manage to do it well. I definitely have a lot of failed projects that do the same thing. Tons of times, I'll end up with three or four threads that feel at first like they go together; and then if I follow them to their natural ending points, it all splits apart and becomes unusable to me. It's back to the drawing board from there. What you see in *Tacky* is the end product of a whole shitload of essays that did not work, and then a dozen that felt like they did.

So you're willing to let go of a project if it isn't working?

I let go of stuff a lot. I do come back to stuff a lot, as well. I have kind of a chaotic workflow in that way, where if a piece of writing feels like it's not working in the moment, I just have to jettison it for a while. And they always say that the secret ingredient is time; that's the secret ingredient in editing, and in thinking through your own ideas. It takes time, and it takes space. You have to take some space away from a project, to come back to it later and read it with fresh eyes. That's really common advice, but it's still true. And I will sometimes go years without touching a draft of something that I was really excited about at first.

People say you should write every day; and I think the idea too, is that you should work on the same project every day for a while, and ideally chip away at it until you have something you can use. But I don't really work that way. I do try and write every day, but it is chaotic like that; I'll work on something for a week, and then put it in a drawer. And I'll work on something else for a week, and then it goes in the drawer. And so I always have a backlog of stuff that I'm enthusiastic about, but just not ready to tackle yet.

I think you were a part of Weird Facebook and that you're big into Twitter. What do online communities or platforms offer you?

It's a double-edged sword, because I think there's a sweet spot with online communities—you don't want to have too many eyes on you, because then people start just shitting on you for no reason. And the benefits do not outweigh the detriments at that point; it just becomes really miserable.

But there was a stretch of about a year on Facebook and on Twitter as well, where I had just enough people in my various social circles. I had enough community reach that I was meeting some really cool people that I wouldn't have met under other circumstances, probably. And I was forming real friendships, lasting friendships, and lasting relationships. And I met my boyfriend on Twitter. It is good for finding those kindred spirit types who you probably wouldn't encounter otherwise.

It's also really bad for just about everything else. It's so corrosive and unpleasant. And I'm really making an honest effort to use social media less after my book stuff is done; because right now, I kind of don't have a

choice. I feel like at a certain point you've met all the people that you're going to meet on Twitter; all the people you're going to get along with. And at that point you need to take a long step back, and come back later when it doesn't make you so miserable.

You're such a hustler, and I respect it. How did you figure out how to make a living through your creative work?

I have stripper instincts, first and foremost. I have no shame about just straight up asking strangers for money when I need it. That impulse sticks with you. When I started my Patreon, I was really struggling financially; and I also had a day job at the time that radically underpaid me, that I hated. And my idea was I was going to start this Patreon. I would build it up slowly, do good work first and then start asking for money, because I knew that it takes a long time; and at a certain point, I would quit my job.

And then I got doxed in June of last year, 2020. Some stranger doxed me to my boss, and sent her a bunch of tweets that I'd done kind of mildly making fun of my job, and also a bunch of tweets that were slutty pictures of me. And so she forwarded this email to me, and was like, "What the hell is this?"

And I had to do a little series of calculations in my head. I thought, "Well, I work for a tiny family business. There are like 10 people in this office. And most of them are my boss's relatives. So if I stay here after this, I'm just going to be the target of gossip for forever." And all of those people also happened to be very religious, so it was going to be that kind of gossip.

And I quit. And then I posted on Twitter what had happened, and why I had quit. And I got a real surge in Patreon patrons, thank god. And that's been my bread and butter ever since. And I feel conflicted about that sometimes. I feel like maybe I shouldn't have these subscribers, and they're only here because they feel sorry for me. But I also do good work every week, and people have the chance to jump ship if they want, and they mostly don't. So I feel good about where I'm at with it right now; but it was a really horrible journey.

I'm glad you got here!

Me too. It could have gone a lot of other ways.

Does writing for your Patreon help you to become a better writer?

Yes. If nothing else, it's forced me to develop better work habits as a writer, because no matter what, I'm on the hook for one piece of writing a week for hundreds of subscribers. And if I don't produce, then probably I'm going to lose a lot of subscribers really quickly. And so, it's not so loosey goosey for me anymore.

And that does have its downsides. There are weeks when I just don't feel like putting my ass in the chair, opening my laptop, and doing the work. And it would be nice to be able to give into that impulse once in a while. But I also know myself; and I know that if I give into the "keep your ass out of the chair" impulse once, I'm going to do it every day for like six months. I'm always fighting, as a writer, against my own impulse to just never do anything.

And on the craft level too, I think writing one piece of critical, personal writing per week has made me much better at doing so quickly and getting to the point quickly. Before I started my Patreon, it would be years that I would be chipping away at the same essay. And I still do that sometimes, but it's also nice to know that I have the ability to write something quickly that still passes my own quality checks.

I often think about and admire how you sold tit pics for Bernie donations. Do you feel that public figures such as yourself have a political responsibility?

I will say I wouldn't do that again for the purpose of electoral politics. I have really given up on thinking that whoever's president is going to change things meaningfully in this country. So I wouldn't do it for Bernie Sanders again. But I also did a few of those fundraisers for Mutual Aid Funds and things like that.

And I do think that people who are prominent should put their money where their mouth is and make a statement one way or the other as to where their loyalties lie. And whether they want to do that by selling nude photos or some other way, that's immaterial. But that was something that I happened to have that I knew people wanted at the time. And I thought, "Fuck it. I will set a price for these things that is worthwhile to me. And if people donate, then that's what they get." I raised a lot of money that way.

Really?

It was really shocking. People want to throw their money around. That's the other thing; there are a lot of people out there with money to throw around, who kind of don't know where to throw it. I feel like I see on Twitter, especially, a lot of paralysis, and a lot of people saying, "I want to donate to more GoFundMes or whatever. But I also know that there are some scammers out there, and I want to donate to Mutual Aid Funds, but I don't know which ones are legit, and which ones are doing the best work or whatever."

And that internal struggle ends up with people who have money to burn just holding onto it until something legitimate presents itself. And so, I think that really the best thing I was able to do with that platform was promote stuff that I believed to be good, and put that stuff in people's face, so that they were presented with a much more stark choice. It wasn't just a million GoFundMes floating around in the internet ether, and you have to pick one. A selection was being curated for them. And I think that's something really important that people should be doing, is take the time to learn who's doing that work, and throw your weight behind them. Don't try to be a hero yourself. A lot of good-hearted people feel this urge to cram the good works of decades into about a week once they learn about some injustice for the first time—they want to start a relief fund on their own, or operate their own community fridge or whatever—but they're too new, they don't know what they're doing, and they make a lot of wasted efforts before giving up and going home. Don't do that. Find the people who have been doing the work and support them.

Rax King Recommends:

food: mumbo sauce (the official condiment of Washington DC)

movie: House of Gucci (don't even care that it was terrible, it was too fun)

book: *Darryl* by Jackie Ess (crams an extraordinary degree of insight into less than 200 pages)

TV show: High Maintenance (only just got into it! a very weird 2010s time capsule!)

Dog sweater store: Old Navy (don't sleep on Old Navy, they're turning out some fly dog outfits)

Name

Rax King

Vocation

Writer

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Nikki Austin-Garlington