

On learning about yourself through your work



Writer, teacher, and organizer Anjali Enjeti discusses what you can come to know about yourself when building communities and writing books.

May 20, 2021 -

As told to Christina Lee, 2545 words.

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During an election month, season or even year, how do you avoid burnout?

One of the hardest things of 2020 and of [Georgia's senate] runoff is that we have the pandemic. You might knock on 100 doors, but then you all go out to dinner afterwards or you do a phone banking session at someone's house and you're ordering beer and pizza. Because of the pandemic, we didn't have that. Meetings were all over Zoom or in group texts. That was a big factor in my personal burning out this year, was that when you can't hug somebody that you are working with nonstop, or just see their face. Interactions with human beings really power you through. Not having that very often during the pandemic was really, really difficult.

But yes, in the four to five months before every election none of us are sleeping. Someone would ask a question at 3:00 a.m. and three or four people in the group text would respond to it. There's just too many issues that come up. There's too many voters to get to the polls.

I had some health issues crop up this time around. I ignored them. After the runoff, oh, I paid for them big time. I'm fine, but I have chronic pain already that I've had half my life, and I had a major flare-up of my chronic pain and ended up having a procedure. I got diagnosed with an autoimmune disease. I probably should've gotten that checked out earlier, but I was just busy with the election. For the [2020 Georgia] runoff especially, the entire country was looking at Georgia.

Basically, organizers did not get a break from the presidential election until May 31st when the Georgia legislative session ended. In a few months, we're going to have to gear up for redistricting and local elections. I'm in my happy place right now of still doing very light organizing work, but largely taking a break, and recovering, and piecing my life back together.

You're helping mobilize a community that otherwise wasn't engaged with the political process, the AAPI community. What does it take to bring together a group of folks to rally around a greater cause, especially a group that hadn't been previously activated?

I've been a volunteer in progressive spaces since I was in college. For a while, I was working solely on intimate partner violence, abortion rights, and sexual violence. But soon after Trump won, I found out that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders historically had the lowest voter turnout of any racial demographic in the US. That was startling to me.

I met Rep. Sam Park early on in Jon Ossoff's campaign for [Georgia's] sixth congressional district, which is where I live. I met him at my house because I held an event for Jon, and he said, "We need to get all the Asian

Americans together to get out the vote in our community. Are you in?" I was like, "Sure." I was one of several volunteers who worked with Sam in trying to mobilize our folks. We started doing events in people's homes that were geared towards Asian Americans, meet and greet at parks. We started catering our messaging to Asian Americans. We had people working in various Korean, Chinese, Filipinx, Indian, or Pakistani communities to get them interested in the election.

The first time I started knocking doors for any reason was for Jon's campaign. I live in a very heavily Asian American area, and most of the doors that we're knocking were for Asian American households. Several voters would come to the door and tell me that they weren't political. They were eligible to vote, but they didn't actually vote. When I had those conversations earlier on, I just thought, "I got to figure out how to do this. I'm going to learn from whoever is around me, whoever has experience, how to be good at having a conversation with people who are eligible to vote but don't feel like the American electoral process speaks to them." I was learning what I could from organizations like Center for Pan Asian Community Services and Asian Americans Advancing Justice. I would look at New Georgia Project's social media, like, "That's a good idea," or, "I like that graphic."

High school kids are knocking doors, creating graphics, doing translations, doing phone banking, writing postcards. My favorite way of interacting with voters has always been knocking doors. But, there are so many ways now that one could interact with a voter that accommodate people with language barriers, with disabilities, who don't have child care or transportation.

It helps, too, to have people who look like the community that they're trying to mobilize. I am so much more effective when I am knocking on another Asian American voter's door. On the phone, when I say my name, which does not sound like an Anglo-Saxon name, and somebody picks up, and they or their parents have origins outside of the U.S., I get more time with them. We trust people that we have commonalities with, and we can actually build a relationship with them. When we give them information, they're more likely to share it with their neighbors or their friends if they get it from us.

One of the things I did a lot of this year is, if I had a good conversation with an Asian voter on the phone, I would ask them if I could save their name and number in my contacts and follow up with them to see how their voting experience was, so I could make sure that they actually voted. A lot of them were very open to that. "I would love that."

We were building the community as we were reaching the community. We were including more people in the process. And that works really well when people relate to something in your life.

Some news outlets are still barring their journalists from taking an activist stance. What do you think?

There is an entire movement called Movement Journalism where journalists are being critical of the current model of journalism. It's basically looking at systems of power in ways that are critical but also centering the needs of the community that is most affected by issues—making sure that they are getting the opportunity to tell their story and that we are not unnecessarily privileging other points of view, especially from people that are doing harm to those communities.

I write a little bit about this idea of centering people that are most harmed in *Southbound*. But in recent years this has picked up. People are seeing this as a reasonable alternative to traditional news media, which has prided itself on objectivity. When really, how can we possibly be objective? We're just human beings. When we come to a story, we come with all of the experiences we've had as a human being. We use our lens, knowledge, and experience to figure out what the angle of the story is.

This is a good moment to really reflect on what it is that we're trying to get out of reporting when we pretend that people don't have an opinion or a certain point of view. Viet Thanh Nguyen has talked about this a lot in essays and tweets about the "objective" reporting about the Vietnam War, for example, which was called the American War in Vietnam. When we read news articles from that reporting, they're extremely biased toward U.S. imperialism and colonialism.

I'm hoping Movement Journalism becomes mainstream journalism. When you center the people and the communities that are most harmed, you actually are being objective. Sure, get a quote from whatever factory let the gas leak happen that killed members of that community, but let's get interviews from the family members, and the employees who saw the dangerous circumstances and reported them but were ignored. I only very recently became familiar with this movement, but I'm very glad it has a name, and I hope to learn a lot more from the journalists that are really at the head of this movement.

How does a project like *Southbound* even begin?

I pitched seven books for 11 years, and *Southbound* was my first contract. But actually, that book took the shortest amount of time of any of the other books to write. When I pitched *Southbound*, it was the seventh book that I pitched, but it got the book contract before *The Parted Earth*. *The Parted Earth* was written before *Southbound*.

I submitted *The Parted Earth* for almost three and a half years trying to get an agent for it. While I was failing at submitting that book, I wrote a book proposal for *Southbound*. The process of *Southbound* was actually fairly short. But the first book I tried to sell way back when—I was pregnant with my third kid, so this was in 2007—was a collection of essays. The second book I tried to sell was an anthology that I was co-editing with other people's essays. So I had an idea how to do the essay, collection-type book proposal.

I had the idea for *Southbound*, and then I contacted the then-editor in chief, Walter Biggins. I had met him at an anti-gun rally in Atlanta, before Trump was elected. I emailed him a few months later, told him about this idea, and asked how to pitch UGA Press. He gave me some pointers, and I gave him an early but incomplete draft of a proposal. He very much guided me in the process.

What happened with *Southbound* was that the final book looks different from the book proposal that I sold to UGA Press. I ended up having a lot more about my complicity in white supremacy in the final book than what I had initially proposed, because I was kind of scared and ashamed to write about it. It took a lot of internalized emotional and psychological work to get a book that I felt was the true story.

So, the book ended up focusing more on social change and activism and also learning about complicity and understanding where I had been complicit. Standing by and doing nothing is complicity. Not having tough conversations can be complicit. Not speaking up is complicit. Not even knowing that the bridge you're walking on over a river was a site of a lynching, there's a degree of complicity there. These were all things I knew already, I just wasn't ready to write about them.

Once I found myself ready, when I was writing the full book, it ended up being a fairly quick process. And it was a more rewarding experience because I continued to learn more about myself, these flaws I have, and how I can better address them and interrogate them. I hope ultimately that's what makes the book more valuable, is that I was super honest about stuff that I didn't necessarily want to admit to.

Was there anything in particular that brought on that shift?

Southbound had a lot more essays about my personal racialized trauma growing up in the South. I cut a lot of them out, because I started asking myself, "Am I always going to be in this place where I just hold on to this, and some days it's fine and other days something triggers me?"

I just thought, "What can I do with this? What can it become?" When I asked myself that question, I was like, I've always taken these experiences and turned them into some sort of collective action. Instead of being an individual who is injured, I always ended up being a part of some kind of community or coalition.

Well, gosh. Why wouldn't I write about that? Racialized trauma—there are a lot of books about that. Why not write instead about what I did with it and what other people can do with it, if they are in the space mentally and emotionally to do so? Why not write about what can come from it? Which is activism, social change, coalition

building, taking a look at how other people are far more marginalized than you are and have far more trauma than you do, and feeling useful in helping with that, in dismantling white supremacy.

It's more forward movement than sitting in trauma. It becomes this energy that can be put into a more positive place. And it's very healing. It's like therapy to me. When that horrific shooting happened at the Atlanta spas in the Atlanta metro area...I'm in all these text groups with Asian American organizers, and in other text groups with other Black and and Latin organizers. But especially in the Asian American text group, everyone was absolutely devastated and horrified. Those shootings brought up a lot of racism that people had personally dealt with in their life.

But then, what happened? We started organizing. Should we do a vigil? Who can meet up at the spa and bring flowers? Who can donate money for those flowers? Who can help elevate this event being done by the Korean community? We're organizing a protest; who can speak at that? We actively and collectively worked together to bring comfort to the communities that were most affected, where it could've very much been us individually just shutting down and talking about it maybe on social media, but otherwise just holding in the sadness, grief, and pain, and not doing anything with it. Having this outlet not only helps other people, but it really does help you work through your own trauma.

How did you know when *Southbound* was done?

I had to turn in the manuscript last June, so this was well before the presidential election. I'm writing about this election, and I'm organizing for it at the same time, and none of this was going in the book. Of course for the runoff we were up and running again.

I was freaking out and I was telling a friend, "I wish I had another year on this book." She was like, "When you look at the book, think about how it might read to somebody 10 years from now. They will look back and know when this book was written, and they will understand this time better. You're not going to be able to always update it because there's always going to be something else that happens." Think of it as being a snapshot of that moment, and be done with it. Think of it as being a historical record of what happened then.

Once that friend told me this, I was like, "It is what it is. Hopefully some of it will feel like it's timeless. Others of it won't. But, those parts will feel like a moment in time that we can look back and reflect on." And for better or worse, I finished it.

Anjali Enjeti Recommends:

5 Best Documentaries I Watched During the Pandemic

Assassins

Three Identical Strangers

Athlete A

Knock Down the House

40 Years a Prisoner

Name

Anjali Enjeti

Vocation

Writer, teacher, activist

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Mira Sydow