



Issue 13— October 2021 : The Dishes, Keep Writing, Sex Education, Make
Your Art No Matter What

the dishes

How well do you know me? If you know me even a little may be aware that I frequently gripe about doing the dishes. I know, I know, we all have to do the dishes, but pay attention here; I home-school my kids, and while my cooking is far from inspired, I cook most things from scratch. That means I'm cooking 458 times a day, at least. To top it all off, I haven't had a dishwashing machine in more than five years! The dish-whining reached new heights when I took a night-job as janitor of a preschool and returned home each night to a sink full of, you guessed it, dishes.

Well, I quit my cleaning job and I wrote a chicken-scratch poem about making peace with the dishes and this bit of writing you read here now is, officially, my very last public display of disdain for dishwashing. No, I didn't purchase a dishwasher – at the moment the labor of figuring out how to fit a machine into my already makeshift kitchen feels more daunting than hand-washing. Instead, I've simply resigned myself to the mundane task of cleaning crockery and cutlery, everyday, for what feels like forever. I'm at a point in my life where changing isn't so much about making changes, but surrendering to the choices I've already made. Resignation and surrender sink me into my body; embodied, I face mortality squarely. Doing dishes is about death. Whining, I express the terror of doing the same damn shit everyday until I die. Not whining, I do the same damn shit everyday until I die, already dead, in a way. What a relief surrender can be; repetition and domestic labor are like hand-rails I plan to hold tight through this shit-storm of whatever-the-fuck reality we are inside of right now.

Sometimes we need life to be easier, but to make it easy we have to do the stuff that life needs us to do. We can't easy our way out of raising kids or providing food or scrubbing the mildew from the bath tile. Life is labor and I've come to find rest in the work. I'm not necessarily happy about all this mind you, but who cares? Happy is for that moment just after dinner but before the dishes when everyone is full and relaxed and the fart jokes start getting tossed around the table. Happy is for kissing the neck of my lover when he's the one at the sink. Happy for a life lived fully, completely, all the way. To know my work and do it. To find little closets of space to write, to find someone to read it.

Dear Talking Mirror,

I found a writing contest a while back, and wanted to enter, but then I noticed that it was only for disabled people. Curious as I am, I read the fine print, and was surprised, nay shocked, to see that my illnesses were listed. I qualify as a disabled writer (by the standards of this contest, at least)! Recurrent depression and anxiety have definitely limited me in the past. For example, I was unable to finish my bachelor's degree. I also received life-saving support in psych wards for 4-6 weeks at a time. I had some very unstable years. But I feel guilty/weird about "cashing in on" my illness. Am I disabling myself further by pretending I'm not disabled?! I am currently able to support myself and even have some \$\$ left over for beautiful luxuries like fresh flowers and poetry chapbooks. But the contest did NOT specify an income level! Why am I reluctant to take this opportunity?

I understand identity to be more of a fluid process for learning than a concrete set of data points about the self. In many aspects of identity, we have to hold language up to a mirror to see if our selves are reflected back. If this contest alone brought your disability into focus, it makes sense that aren't quite sure who you are in relationship to the word disabled, especially if your disability is less visible in the public realm or less socially recognized among peers. As a writer, you might find it helpful to do research, take notes and make journal entries on the topic of disability and your mental health story. Allow yourself the time and space to contemplate how you align with his identity marker and give yourself grace for feeling uncertain.

In general, I don't think a person "disables themselves", and folks of all abilities make "good" or "bad" decisions based on a variety of reasons – environmental, relational or physiological in nature. I do think it would be a disingenuous to only identify as disabled for the sake of one writing contest, which is where your concern with "cashing in" may come from. In the future, if you refuse an opportunity like this, reassure yourself it's because you are still learning about who you are and not because you are self-harming.

We have writing contests for disabled people (or any marginalized community) not as an act of charity but to curate a rich atmosphere for storytelling from voices that are often distorted or misrepresented by the able-bodied majority. I want to read the story from a disabled writer because it aids me in knowing and loving the world expressed through the world's way of expressing. Again and again, even if you never find a comfortable way of identifying, keep paying your bills, buying the flowers, reading the poems and writing. Keep writing and sharing your work with the world.

I am in a 10year relationship. If I had to make a pie chart, I would say our life together is 75% awesome. My partner X is caring, affectionate, and generous, but(t): He has very little interest in sex (defined broadly as anything pleasurable that I wouldn't want to do in public). I would like to get naked every week, or at least once a month. X never

initiates, and rarely responds to my "efforts". We get on the same page every 6 months or so, and it's driving me nuts...

Any hard-won advice you can share? My suggestion (not entirely serious) that I could start looking for a sex partner to "take the pressure off" was met with dismay.

Ten years together is a long time – congratulations on nurturing a strong relationship that is mostly pretty-damn-great. To be flawed is to be human and a relationship between two people is bound to be at least 25% kinda shitty. I'd say any two people who sincerely care for one another are capable of deepening their relationship into a wider range of love.

All relationships, even and especially pretty-damn-good ones, require care and maintenance. You can appreciate what you have and still invest in the health of your partnership. You can appreciate what you have and make space to grieve what you don't have. Nothing we do guarantees a life shaped to suit our every desire and yet, understanding our desire helps us make necessary adjustments to the shape of our relationship. Approach these adjustments lovingly. Life, in my experience, responds favorably to loving attention.

I am of the mind that if a couple insists on being monogamous then they must put real effort into assisting their partner meet their sexual needs and finding middle ground for a pretty-damn-good, 75% awesome sex life. For you this might mean living with less sex than you crave, for him this might mean learning to be more vulnerable. Both of you must commit to the shared labor of caring for your partnership.

Whatever good comes will come from clear communication. If there is discord in the bedroom, most likely there is discord in communication lines as well. How well do you and your partner communicate? Is your partner listening to you when you say you need more sex? And, as vulnerable as it may be, is he able to admit why he does not desire to be with you as frequently? Are you strong enough to hear why? How can you make space in your relationship to express love for each other within the discomfort of conflict? Agree to participate in these conversations at a gentle pace and with plenty of room for reflection. You must help each other feel safe and trust the other to love you as you are.

If you have access to Netflix I highly recommend watching the show Sex Education. Juicy and entertaining, it's a fun show on its own. It also lives up to its name as master class on sexuality, relationship, gender, anatomy, communication, eroticism, etc. Watch together and laugh, take stock of what you learn and talk about topics relevant to you and partnership. Open up channels of communication and get REAL with each other, listen to each other. Even if your sex life doesn't shift dramatically, your relationship will benefit greatly.

I have been attempting to formulate this question for many months - for longer than I've been a subscriber and also for longer than I've been an employee at a new job. The

job is the question. I've officially hit my 3 month mark at this position, and the honeymoon period feels over. One of the reasons I took the position (my first job outside of being a homeschooling parent in 15yrs!) was to hopefully stretch my attention and creative muscles. I tend to bip and bop from one activity/hobby/interest to the next. The freedom and privilege of being able to do so, as well as the ability to become bored of already, is not lost on me. The reality is that I did not take this job for money but for other reasons, including learning new ways to interact in my community that don't center myself. Ironically, the main reason I've considered quitting is that I can't tell if my work is appreciated. Am I doing what's being asked of me and am just used to more praise/feedback in my ventures than is common at typical work environments? Again, I don't need the money - so do I need the stress? Will this help me grow?

When it comes to my kids, the answer to such a question has been "no". So why would I subject myself to the stress? When I reflect honestly, I realize that I may not be reacting to actual information but things I may have imagined. When I just focus on doing my best without strings attached, I do feel better.

I truly cannot decide whether the feelings I'm having are akin to imposter syndrome, or an aspect of my distaste for capitalism, or my newly discovered anxiety disorder, or the pandemic, or the fact that as an artist I want to do things that WOW people and sometimes what is needed of me is mundane, or a little of all of it. Thoughts?

Everything you typed above: bouncing between projects, comprehending the difference between hobbies and serious work, wanting validation, feeling like an imposter, trying to posture your creative work in the face of capitalism – all describe the shadow side of being an artist.

Most artists switching from domestic creativity to public projects find the transition especially stressful and unpleasant. Trust me, it's part of the process! Even seasoned artists experience self-doubt and imposter syndrome when starting a new project or displaying new work. Don't quit! (It is fine to quit your job, just don't quit your commitment to the creative work this job asks of you.) Quitting might offer relief from momentary stress, but it won't stop you from being an artist, nor will it offer protection from facing these same feelings in the future. Commitment is a good friend to creative people; it's too easy to give up on our work. Nobody really cares if we make art or not, yet a healthy human culture requires art! Imagine a world without your favorite movies, songs, paintings, poems and stories!

I recommend reading *Your Art Will Save Your Life* and other literature by Beth Pickens. Beth is a professional counselor and her books are written to serve the specific needs of artists. Making creative work is a process, but living as an artist is a journey! Take comfort in knowing other artists are on the journey with you and we are working through the same discomfort of being grossly visible and hardly noticed at the same time, among other harsh feelings of ineptitude. Your creative work is valuable and worth doing. People will come in contact with your work and be forever changed.