



Natasha Scripture

266: The Art of the Travel Memoir

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing. Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are at diymfa.com/266 because it's Episode 266.

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Now, today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Natasha Scripture.

Natasha is an author, poet, humanitarian, and former aid worker. As a spokesperson for the United Nations, she covered humanitarian crises around the world. And before the UN, she worked for a variety of organizations, including the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera English, the World Bank, TED, National Geographic, and Condé Nast Publications.

She has been published in the New York Times, the Telegraph, Glamour UK, the Sydney Morning Herald, HuffPost, New York Post, and the Atlantic, among other publications. She has also been featured in Marie Claire, Women's Health, and the Sunday Times Style magazine.

Natasha has lived in several different countries. She travels frequently, and seeks to inspire and empower women everywhere with her writing and her storytelling. Her first book is *Man Fast: A Memoir*, which we'll be discussing on the show today.

Welcome, Natasha, it is so great to have you here.

Natasha Scripture: Thank you so much for having me.

GP: So, I always like to start out these interviews by asking about the story behind the story. And you do a beautiful job of explaining this in the book, and basically, the whole first chapter is the sort of prelude to the *Man Fast*, to the travel log.

But can you give our listeners a, sort of, condensed version of that just so they have the context of where this book came from? What inspired you to write this book, and why?

NS: Yeah, well, like with any creative work, what started off as one thing ended up becoming another thing. So, originally, it was supposed to be a self-help book for women about a dating detox, right? This is what I describe a *Man Fast* as, except for, I call it a spiritual detox from dating.

So, when I was working with my agent, we put together a proposal that had a very much a self-help proponent to it. And then, when we got down to writing or when I got down to writing, it ended up just, a memoir plopped out.



So, it was supposed-- So much had happened between the initial idea and when I actually, you know, got a publisher and got the contract and started writing; it was a couple years. So, you know, things change and I just was like, 'I'm going to allow it to come out the way it wants to come out.'

So, essentially, what had happened is I had been living and working in New York City after living abroad – overseas, as you mentioned, with the UN – for many years. And I was in my late 30s, and I was kind of at that stage where I'm like, 'Okay, I should probably meet somebody and have a baby if I'm going to do the whole, you know, baby thing.'

And I went on like a gazillion terrible dates, I think a lot of women can identify with that, in and outside of New York City. And I just got so burned out from dating, there's so much choice in the city and I just felt that I needed to take a break.

So, that's why, you know, after a year of being online and meeting with matchmakers and having friends set me up, I felt like I lost myself in the search for the one and I wanted to take some time to recalibrate. So, hence the Man Fast, which was a nine-month sabbatical from dating.

GP: I love it. I love that summary. And also, there's an element of processing grief too, right? Like in the book you talk about how, like, it was after your father died and all of that, that sort of this Man Fast thing came out. So, can you talk a little bit about, sort of, both, like how the two pieces fit together?

NS: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, and that's part of why the book changed. So, it was no longer a fun and sassy guide to detoxing from dating because I did lose my dad, and that became a huge factor in terms of just what I needed to write about, right?

I wasn't planning on writing about it, and the first draft wasn't – it didn't really even talk about it. And then, I had a friend read it and she said-- She's really into psychoanalysis. And she said, "You know this whole book is about your dad, by the way."

I'm like, really? And so, she could read between the lines, and there was obviously a lot of grief bubbling up. And writing for me is a hundred million percent healing, and it's how I understand my way of being in the world and how I make sense of my thoughts; I just can't do it in my head, I have to put it on paper.

So, when I, you know, started writing, like I said, it became more of a memoir. And it was-- During this time, part of the reason I was kind of rushing to meet somebody, and one of the reasons I moved back to the US is that my dad was ill and I wanted to be closer to home instead of living in, you know, Bangkok or Libya, all these places that I'd been in.

And I was like, I need to meet someone and have a baby so he can meet my grandchild. And it was just this very strange thing I had set up in my head, even though he never put pressure on me to do that. And when I lost him, it just kind of like I lost that will to just be searching for somebody, for the most part. Yeah.

GP: You know, it's interesting also in the book, you talk about how like in some ways the relationship because that relationship with your dad was so powerful and so strong, like, kind of, the other guys just didn't measure up, as it were.

So, I think that's really interesting as well how your friend said, you know, that it's really about your dad, even though it's also was about detoxing from dating.

NS: Right. And I think that we often do that as women; we compare our partners to the person, the male figure that was most prominent in our lives. And I was fortunate enough to have someone who



was so incredible and who loved me so much that I didn't feel like that was lacking in my life, which is why I went through my 20s and 30s pretty much single.

I mean, I had relationships here and there, but that wasn't really the focus. It was always like adventure and travel and professional accomplishments, et cetera. So, it was like, I never felt like there was this void that needed to be filled. But I think, you know, when I got to a certain age--

I mean, there's also all that social pressure and cultural pressure; my mom is Indian as you know, and there's just like an added layer of pressure when you have a true-- Well, she's not traditional Indian, you know, in the sense that--

I mean, she lives in the US but, you know, there is a big fixation on marriage and settling down and having a family in South Asian cultures that we don't necessarily have in the West or it's not quite as strong.

GP: You know, it's interesting also what-- I'm glad that you brought up this idea of the social pressures because one of the things that came up while I was reading the book is; so, I grew up in New York City, as we mentioned when we were chatting before the interview, and I went to this ultra-feminist, very progressive all-girls prep school in New York.

You know the type of school because you lived here. And that experience of being in the school and being surrounded by messages of women's empowerment and like, you know, 'You don't need men to define who you are,' that whole thing.

And I still look back on that and realize like there was still this undercurrent of emphasis that was placed on your identity as a person attached to, 'Did you have a boyfriend or did you have the--' You know what I mean?

Like there was this idea of being incomplete if there was no guy or partner in your life, even in high school, which is absurd to me now, looking back on this. So, I was wondering, can you talk a little bit more about this, since you already mentioned it, this pressure that is on us, especially on women, but I think just in general this idea of, you know, 'You complete me...' having to find another person to be a complete human?

NS: I mean, absolutely, it is ludicrous that we have this, even in today's age.

GP: Uh-huh.

NS: Women are, you know, independent financially, emotionally, everything – but yet, we still, (society, media) there's so many subversive forces that make us feel like we are still incomplete, right?

So, it's almost like we start off whole; and then as we move through our lives, our sense of wholeness is chipped away as women and we have to like work really hard to restore that and make sure that doesn't happen.

And I felt that I was so kind of consumed by the idea that I was incomplete without someone at a certain point. I don't want to-- I can't blame one thing in particular, but it could be something as like you say, from even high school, people want to have boyfriends and they want to--

They feel like they're cool if they have a partner. If they don't, then there's something wrong with them. Or you know, basically, I feel that I was trying to reconnect with my sense of wholeness as a woman on my Man Fast because what I had realized was, I wasn't willing to settle because I had such a wonderful father.



I was like, 'I am not going to just settle for some creep' or, you know, I mean, or some just average guy. You know, you wait so long for love, it's like, 'I'm not going to just settle for anybody.' It didn't feel right in my gut.

So, part of what I was doing during that nine-month period was like, how can I create my life so that I am completely fulfilled and satisfied on my own without a man? And that involved a lot of investing in so much that I already had in my life, but I didn't really recognize that abundance – so like friendships, right?

I mean, if you go through your life, most of your life, 20s and 30s as a single woman in New York City, you have a lot of friends; and a lot of girlfriends, and they just become like your soul sisters.

So, instead of having one relationship with one person, you have like so many deep-lasting relationships and friendships, which is wonderful. And getting involved in community, so whether it be yoga community; I go to this Ashram outside of New York City called Ananda Ashram, and it's just like a wonderful place.

So, like being a part of a spiritual community; and then, you know, having my creative interest, and all of that. And then, of course, my professional network with the UN. So, I was just like really focused on all these other ways in which my life was fulfilling to me that didn't involve pure romance.

I always like to think about the Greeks because the Greeks were so wise, the Ancient Greeks. I mean, they had so many words for love beyond Eros, which is what we're so obsessed with in this culture.

You know, there's so many different kinds of love; like Agape (spiritual love) – and then, or the love between friends, like the platonic love (Philia). And so, I just started to think, you know, there's so many different kinds of love in my life.

Just because I don't have some guy doesn't mean there's anything wrong with me. So, a lot of that was like kind of moving through that mental process of realizing I am 100% whole; and just because I don't have a boyfriend or a husband, that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with me or that my life is incomplete in some way.

GP: I am right there with you. I remember in, I think it was in 10th or 11th grade, I was at summer camp and it was, kind of, like "the thing" was like what you described, like that you had to have like your 'camp boyfriend' or it wasn't like, you know, you weren't cool.

And I was like the one girl who just didn't really refused, like across the board. And it's because, you know, the guys there were just not like, I wasn't interested in them. Like they were nice, but not boyfriend material.

And I remember, at one point, this other girl in the camp was like, 'Why don't you have a boyfriend?' I'm like, 'I don't need a boyfriend to be a person. Like, I'm who I am just because I am.'

And the look of shock on her face, it was like, all of a sudden, she had permission to not have to abide by this like, weird rule that seemed to dictate, you know, the culture of that summer camp.

So, it's funny how pervasive this stuff is in our culture. Quick aside, because you know, you and I have both been talking about like, you know, Man Fast, finding the right guy.

Obviously, you know, I'm married to my husband and, you know, you've got your fiancé. Like, but this-- I think the same dynamic is also happening no matter whether it's like looking for a guy or for a girl or whatever the relationship.



But do you think the pressures are different for folks, like for guys, for instance, as opposed to us women? And also, for-- I was even thinking as you were talking, for you know, like people who, like LGBTQ, do they have the same kind of pressures, do you think?

Natasha Scripture: Yeah, well in terms of men, I do think it's different. I mean, I do think that they face pressure, for sure. Like my partner is Iranian, and you know, people are like, 'Why don't you meet someone? Why don't you get a relationship and why aren't you married?'

But that it's a different kind of pressure. It's not like, 'You must do it because you have to have kids now or, you know, your biological clock is ticking,' and all of that. It's very different, of course, when you factor in the whole fertility thing, men are less fertile the older they get, according to studies.

But the point is, it's like, 'Oh, he's just a bachelor.' He gets the label 'bachelor', whereas we get the label 'spinster'. But a bachelor is like kind of like, 'Oh, he's a bachelor – he's a man about town.' It's not like-- I'd much rather be a bachelor than a spinster, which they still used in many countries – in India for example, in a non-satirical way.

Of course, you know, Kate Bolick and a lot of other authors are trying to rebrand this kind of notion of spinsterhood, but I do think the pressure is different. It just, it is unfortunately; women, we just bear the brunt of this.

But I think with LGBTQ, I think it's different. And I also feel like they have already so many challenges getting into, it's like such a different terrain that they're kind of navigating. It's almost like you can't even compare it because it's so like unconventional.

So, like if you think about it, if I look it up from an Indian perspective, it's becoming, you know, things are shifting obviously, which is wonderful, but there still is a lot of homophobia in India and other countries, of course, and even in the US – but the fixation isn't like, 'Oh, he's gay, but he needs to find a husband.'

It's like, 'Oh my God, he's gay, we need to make him straight.' You know what I mean?

GP: Yeah.

NS: So, I think it's completely different.

GP: Yeah, it's just fascinating to think about all of these different things. Like, that's one of the things I've really enjoyed with this book as I'm reading it. And I'm still about halfway through; so, no spoilers, but it really makes me think about all of these paradigms that we have in our society.

You know, one of the things that occurred to me too as I was thinking about these expectations of, you know, like what we've been talking about, sort of the relationship expectations, there's also sort of a parallel in the career sphere, right?

Like that there are certain, almost like the way we conflate individuals with who they are based on their relationship, we also often conflate who people are with what they do as their career.

Did you find that as you were, you know, embarking on your Man-Fast, that there was some element of like career-fast that was also having to happen?

NS: Oh, absolutely. I mean, I had started to feel a little bit, I don't want to say-- Well, I was definitely jaded about guys, and I didn't want to be that kind of 'stereotypical better cynical woman', you know, who'd just been on too many dates in New York.



So, I saw that, I recognized that myself. But in terms of career, I was also feeling a little disenchanted because I had moved from being in the field to being at headquarters, which has its whole host of other kind of just more politics and you're a lot-- You know, you're far removed from the people that you're trying to help, right?

So, instead of being in, you know, Haiti right after the earthquake, which was the kind of thing that I did, I was like in an office dealing with a lot of like politics. I just felt like-- I also felt that I had given-- I loved, loved my work, honestly; I put so much into it, especially my early 30s.

I was just moving up the career ladder, but I never, ever slowed down. And that was a lot of what I also was trying to do in my Man-Fast; I never took the time to process anything that I had experienced or witnessed.

Like, you know, when you're in an emergency, a crisis setting, like, which is what I was doing for a long time. So, for example, in Ethiopia, during the famine or like I mentioned Haiti right after the earthquake – I mean, you see some horrific stuff because you are there in the working capacity, you're not allowed to have a breakdown.

And so, I really felt very strong, like I kept myself strong for my work; and then I would get back to headquarters, which at the time was Rome, based in Rome, and I wouldn't even have a chance to--

I wouldn't even take a week off to kind of go through what I'd experienced, like what I'd seen, like families made homeless by natural disasters or, you know, dead bodies or, I mean, just human suffering on such a grand scale.

So, I wanted to take time and honor the fact that I had experienced all of this, and that I also needed time to process and digest it. And even if it wasn't my own grief personally, it was like, I still felt like it had impacted me because, you know, if you're an empathetic human being, of course, you're going to be affected by what you see; and you're eventually going to have to try to understand it and make sense of it.

And I felt, I guess, that's where I'm going is like I was trying to like-- Really, in a way, it was a midlife crisis because it was like, what is the meaning of life if there's so much suffering? How do we make sense of it all? So, these were the kinds of questions that drove this pilgrimage of sorts that I was on.

GP: So, speaking of this pilgrimage, this is such a great transition to talking about, sort of, how you structured the memoir because there's a lot of travel in this, not just before you went on the Man-Fast, but then once you embarked on this journey – both an inward journey but then also a literal journey.

Can you talk a little bit about how you structured both the writing, and also the Man Fast itself and the journey that you embarked on?

NS: Yeah, I mean, originally, like I mentioned, the book proposal that I sold had nine chapters; and every chapter, I was going to deal with a self-defeating behavior that I had when it came to relationships, and then I would prescribe a remedy – and it was experiential.

So, I would actually, basically, be tasked with trying to address, for example, my commitment phobia by committing to something, right? So, it was really kind of prescriptive; and I'm not a very prescriptive person, so I never really felt 100% comfortable with that.

So, there was that structure, but like I said, once I started writing, all that went out the window. But I had a sense, I knew I would leave New York that was-- And I finagled an amazing setup where I could telecommute for the UN a couple days a week so I would have an income.



And I knew that I would probably go to India because it was a January when I started writing, and I usually try to go to India where my mom still has a place to stay because it's hot and it's spiritual – you know, and it's free.

So, those three things had its appeal; and I knew that I could go there and have some space, you know, some spaciousness to write, which is what I really wanted. I didn't realize I was going to be traveling as much as I ended up traveling; I kind of just went with the flow.

But the chapters didn't end up being nine anymore; it ended up being five. And what we have are different themes, right? So, the first chapter is allowing, where I basically allow myself to feel the grief that I feel; over what I'd seen as an aid worker, over the death of my father, over a big bad breakup that I actually had before I left New York.

So, allowing myself to actually like, sit with those emotions instead of doing what a lot of people do and what I had been doing, which was to just keep myself so frantically busy that I don't have to actually turn inward and deal with myself and my emotions.

So, that was a lot of what I was doing in India when I was in Kerala and I was, living at an Ashram, and I was exploring Ayurveda, which is a 5000-year-old mind-body-spirit science based on the ancient Hindu scriptures.

And then, in the next chapter, which is called Surrendering. So, everything was around surrendering to-- Most of that chapter was in Indiana. And again, it was like surrendering to the fact that I wasn't where I needed to be in my life or where I thought I should be in my life at almost 40; like, I didn't have a partner and kids.

And it was like, a lot of that was about self-acceptance. So, you'll see, and you probably have seen this if you've gotten to this part, is like, there's a lot of Buddhist terminology and references in the book.

I mean, I basically explore both Hinduism and Buddhism in equal parts. Those are the two religions that I find resonate, if we're going to talk about organized religions, with in terms of my spiritual journey.

And then, the third chapter, it's entitled Transcending. I spend a lot of that chapter in-- It's set in Sicily, and I'm really, really desperate at this point, or even when I left New York to reconnect with nature and just immerse myself in nature because I feel like the most transcendental experiences I've actually had in life have been in nature natural settings. And I was in Mount Etna, and it was just beautiful and spiritual.

And then, the next chapter is Connecting; and I'm in Tanzania by this point, and I had been sent there by the UN for a photography assignment. And in that chapter, it was all about like connecting with or feeling this connectivity with the entire world. Like, 'Okay, so I don't have one person, but I'm connected to--' I went on a safari, for example, which was amazing, like a real transformative experience.

I spent time with a lot of children who live in low-income communities for my UN work and just feeling that connectivity with humanity. So, I don't have like a boyfriend, but it's like, 'I have a whole relationship with the world,' which is I think in so many ways more significant than having a relationship with one person, and I'm seeing stuff that people don't you normally get to see. So, really having gratitude for that.

And in the last chapter, it's called Being; and that's, I'm back in the US and I'm really deepening my meditation practice, which I started to explore in a more kind of concerted way in India. And I'm doing all these things to keep me grounded.



So, instead of being the normal overachiever that I always was, I, you know, start, for example, to take Sitar lessons; and my mom gets me Sitar for my birthday, and I wanted to just practice stillness. So, I do a lot of little--

The book has a lot of little experiments within each chapter, and I write about it, and I share like my takeaways and kind of the wisdom that I hopefully accrue during these experiments in an entertaining way – or, at least, I try to.

GP: So, one of the themes that I saw also that came up as I was reading this book, and also as you were just talking and describing the journey, is this idea of like, in order to get to our most sort of essential core self--

And I hate the term ‘finding one’s self’ because it sounds like something you do in college with like a whole lot of beer. But like, you know-- But you know what I mean, like kind of getting to that core essence of who we are that you kind of have to like strip away all the other stuff.

So, and this, of course, ties to what we were just talking about before with like, the way that relationships are often conflated with identity, the way with our jobs are conflated with our own identity. So, like by stripping away those things is how you discovered your core self.

You already sort of talked about like what that journey looked like across the five chapters, but one of the questions that came up in my mind is, you know, we see a lot of the ‘self-discovery type of memoir’ happening in travel stories.

Do you think that it’s necessary to travel or could somebody do that same kind of inward journey and stay at home? Or do we have to like get out of our geographical comfort zone?

NS: Yeah, that’s a really good question. It’s a fair question because I do realize it’s indulgent to just like traipse off, and not everybody has the financial means. So, I did it on a shoestring budget so it can work, but some people have other obligations or it can be really scary to just like quit your job and travel around the world.

I do think though there’s a certain element of freedom that you experience when you leave your familiar environment. It’s almost like you permit yourself to be another person, or to show or to get in touch with another side of yourself that you don’t normally allow to surface when you’re in your regular kind of environment.

So, there is a lot of freedom. I think the soul feels a lot of freedom when you’re traveling. There’s that sense of discovery that kind of is just, intrinsic to being on the road; and then, you know, the serendipities and the flow, and then you don’t know who you’re going to meet, and then you just kind of—

It’s like in that book, *The Alchemist*, everything just seems to kind of be, it’s like the universe is conspiring for you to have these experiences. So, in so many ways, I do feel like it’s great to get away if you can, but part of that is also spaciousness.

I think it’s good to get distance because sometimes when we stay where we are, like we have a lot of taxing relationships that we have to deal with like energy vampires in our lives; whether it’s our boss or, you know, friends that are very demanding.

I think that’s-- It’s more about getting that spaciousness. So, when we talk about self-discovery, I think the most important element is having space. So, but I mean, I just wrote a piece about this for



Mindful Magazine; you can do it, and you can do it and stay in, for example, in New York City, you can – you just have to be pretty vigilant about things.

Like, for example, you know, take regular technology breaks; and I did that when I was traveling, just turn off my phone the days I wasn't working and just be present. Right?

And it's really hard to do that when you have your busy day-to-day activities, right? When we travel, it's a different luxury. We don't-- We're not on the same kind of schedule of like nine-to-five and commuting and, you know, all of those things.

GP: I totally, totally hear you. And as you were talking, I was sitting here like sort of, you know, tongue in cheek, obviously, but kind of conspiring about how I could escape my two crazy children for a couple of days and have my own little like magical journey. But that is the reality, right?

Like for a lot of folks having-- Like, I can't just ditch my kids to go on a, you know, big adventure. So, I'm wondering like for folks who can't do that because of whatever logistical stuff is in their lives, what are some ways that they can create that spaciousness in themselves?

And I'm thinking particularly for writers because I think that spaciousness is what gives us room to then dig in and find those stories that are like deep in us that need to get out. So, what are some things that you could recommend for folks who maybe can't just go off on a safari – even though I really, really want to – but would want to get that inner spaciousness?

NS: Yeah, and that's a completely fair question. And I think it's good that you don't abandon your kids and run off.

[laughter]

NS:: No, I think on, in terms of a daily basis, it's like being really mindful about the things that you say, yes, to, right? So, do you need to go to that? Do you need to say, yes, to the social engagement like, or this dinner party?

I mean, I just felt like in New York, because you know, the longer you're there, if you're a native New Yorker, me, you probably know a million people. So, it's like you're constantly bombarded with things to do because there's so much exciting stuff happening in the city, but also like people inviting you to things.

So, it's like being really mindful about what you say, yes, to because if you say, yes, to that, you're saying, no, to yourself and what a night that could be spent – for example, writing or you could just go to the park even with your kids and then they could play, and you could sit there and journal. You know what I mean?

Like, it's being really, I guess, discerning about how you spend your time, you know, in the evenings or before and after work. I mean, I also think waking up early is so wonderful. I mean, I have a baby on the way, so I think guess I'm never going to sleep again.

But, you know, but I think when your kids are a little older, it's like before they wake up and, you know, have to go through the whole school thing – it's like, can you wake up a little like an hour earlier and just have a little bit of a ritual, like make a pot of tea, sit at your computer, do the morning pages like Julia Cameron prescribes in *The Artist's Way*, go for a beautiful walk in the forest.

I mean, that to me, like I said earlier, nature is the most inspiring; nature has all the answers. So, somehow immersing yourself even in New York City, even if it's like Central Park or somewhere like a green natural space to just go – and place that allows you to contemplate.



I'm not talking about like Midtown Manhattan, right? I think that just does wonders. And leave your phone at home or, you know, hopefully, your partner can look after the kids and, you know--

I mean, I know people feel like they can't leave their phone. They have to be-- It has me on all the time because of emergencies. But I do find that when I turn off my computer, the internet, the phone, I just feel like I can breathe. And I think that's technology like-- You know, limiting our use of technology is so huge.

GP: I could not agree more. And you know, it's interesting what you were saying about being present because actually that's one of the things I've been doing. Like right now as we record this, it's the beginning of summer and one of the things that--

We're in this weird limbo time where like my kids' school has ended, but summer camp has not yet begun. So, it's like, we have all these hours in the day that I just don't know what to do with them.

One of the things that we've gotten into the habit of, the last couple of weeks, has been that; first thing in the morning, both my kids play musical instruments and I practice with them.

So, in the morning it's like, first, you know, I practice piano with my son – I practice violin with my daughter; and it's become like this ritual and because I have to focus on practicing with them, it means I have to put the phone aside.

It means I have to be fully present with that individual child and focusing on that relationship in that moment. And it's become-- It's almost to the point where like, you know, my son will be like to my daughter, 'No, you go away, I've got mom right now.'

And like, it becomes like the special time for us two. And it's funny, like I'll see so many-- Like we'll go to the playground or something, and there are all these parents who are watching their kids but also watching their phone; and it's like how fully--

Like I don't know that you need to escape so much as it is, be fully present in whatever it is that you're doing, as opposed to what a lot of us do, which is to be juggling 10 million things at once and not really fully present with anyone.

NS: Yeah, I mean, we're always multitasking; that's the problem. And it's such a shame because we're never, we're like doing everything at 20%, you know, and you don't want to be just there for your kids 20%. I see that too.

Or I see couples at dinner and they're always on their phone, like here in our house, I'm like, we don't have technology on the table. I'm really militant about it. I'm like, the phones just go off to the side. I just, because, you know, there's been--

They've done studies like if you have a phone near you, for example, on the table while you're eating, your concentration and your attention dissipates by like a very large percentage. I don't know what it is, but you can look it up. It's just like, it's enough to make you think, 'Oh God, I don't want to have that near me at all. There's no reason.'

For so many years, for so long, we didn't have that kind of luxury of a cell phone. But you know, going back to the instrument thing, it's really interesting what you said because what I learned with playing the Sitar-- I had this teacher up in Harlem. He was wonderful, and his day was like spent basically just playing the Sitar.



I'm like, 'God, you have the best job.' And then, he'd perform in the evenings, and then he'd take a walk in the middle of the day. He lived by Central Park, kind of. And I found that with the Sitar, that was a meditation for me.

It forced me into meditation because sitting, doing sitting meditation, seated meditation is actually harder. But when you're playing an instrument, it absorbs you completely. You need to be so present to concentrate and to do it right.

And the Sitar is particularly challenging in so many levels. So, that was part of why I picked it up. I mean, I love Sitar music, in general; and I'll never sound like Ravi Shankar, but it was just such a good way of just doing one thing.

You know, because you cannot do anything when you're playing the piano as well, you know, or the violin. I'm assuming, you just cannot do more than that one thing; and that is meditation, right? I mean, a lot of people define meditation as just doing one thing at one moment in time.

GP: It's interesting also, I mean, thinking about like taking the music a step further, it's sort of like in the beginning, when you're learning-- And it's interesting seeing my kids doing this, and the similar process actually happens with writers too.

In the beginning you're focused on the mechanics of what you need to do – so, do you put this finger here or that finger there? Same thing with writers when they're first starting out.

Like, 'Do I have an inciting incident in my story? Do I have-- You know, what kind of a protagonist am I dealing with? What are their motivations?' It's very like thinking about sort of the 'nuts and bolts' of it.

And then, as you get the feeling of the mechanics into your bones, it's like your body – you get like muscle memory around it, and that's when you can actually make it sound like music as opposed to just, you're mechanically playing the notes.

And I think that's sort of the same transcendental experience that happens for us as writers that like, at first, we might be thinking about the mechanics of, how do we get this character from Point A to Point B?

But eventually, it becomes a story, and the characters have life breathed into them and they feel like real people as opposed to just, you know, puppets that get maneuvered around the chess board, as it were.

NS: No, absolutely. And I think, you know, there's a lot of flow and meditation in writing in itself once you kind of get into it-- It's like going to the gym or something – so hard to just get going, but once you get going, there is a flow. There is a--

And you start to feel better. And the more you do it, like if you're writing on a daily basis, the easier it becomes, right? Because everything is practice. So, writing is meditation on so many levels, at least, to me.

And then, you can develop a flow when you sort of stop questioning and judging yourself and then-- You also show up every day, and that's part of like, you know, waking up early, 'Okay, set your alarm at six and just get up and go straight to the computer and start writing.'

I mean, everybody has their own process. But when I was writing this book – well, I was writing like pretty much constantly because the more I wrote, the more creativity I felt.



It was really interesting because I wasn't thinking in a creative way in my job, even though I was working in communications, there's just a different type of brain muscle I was using, right?

But when you're writing, the more you write, the better you do get, honestly; and the more ideas come to you because you're more receptive. So, it's like-- It's like almost like being receptive to these ideas and that you're processing them and then you're transforming them into something beautiful on the page where that will ultimately, hopefully, be beautiful. It's really special.

I mean, yeah, I don't know what I'd do without writing.

GP: Yeah, I feel the same way. You know, one of the things that's come up again and again as we've been talking is this notion of being present, of practicing, of kind of that common thread between all the different things we've talked about from the spiritual side, to also like the actual writing side, to just existing as humans, and meditation and whatnot.

So, if someone wanted to start a practice of some sort, whether it's a instrument practice or a meditation practice or a writing practice, what would you say would be the first step you'd recommend?

NS: I think it's really great to be a part of a community so that you meet like-minded souls; and it's sometimes hard to get started on your own, especially meditation. There's so much around it; you know, it's so trendy now.

And it's like, or the term mindfulness. And it's just nice to go to like a class; a place like New York City has a million meditation centers and classes, and you meet other people and you have like an instructor.

So, I think it's really good to have that, at least, in the beginning until you establish your own practice. And then, I think the other suggestion I would have is starting off small. I'm usually a person who bites off more than she can chew, but it's like, you don't need to do a Vipassana, which is like a 10-day silent retreat where you basically can't talk to anybody or you can't use your technology.

I mean, it's pretty hardcore. You could just start with like five minutes a day, and just get a meditation cushion and maybe put like a little, create a little space in your home – doesn't have to be anything fancy – but where you go and you just plop down, and you're like, you know what?

some days are going to be really hard and some days are going to be easier, you know, so just showing up is like half of the work to set up that kind of consistency. And then, the more you do it, the easier it becomes.

But I think it is good to be around like-minded people who are also interested in deepening their contemplative practice because you can only learn from each other. Right?

GP: Absolutely. And you know, the same thing, I think, is true with writing. Like a lot of times people will, I know I've done this, bite off way more than they can chew. Like the time that I thought, 'I'm going to write the Great American Novel,' and then like two pages and I'm like, 'I don't know what I'm doing.'

And also, the idea of having a community that you can draw on, whether it's in a class or whether it's just from being at conferences or writing events, et cetera – finding those like-minded 'birds of a feather', and trading ideas, talking, connecting. And yeah, everybody, a rising tide lifts all boats, as it were.

NS: Right. And I think, you know, writing groups and writing workshops are super helpful. Even if like you don't really need to go to a memoir writing workshop, for example, it's a great--



I mean, not only does it create a sense of discipline and, you know, sometimes there are assignments, but it's like you're meeting other people. It can be so solitary being a writer, and you can--

You know, obviously, writing is a very solitary experience, but then it's really important, I think, to break it up with some human interaction – I mean, at least, for me, it is.

So, I think, you know, in so many places, just even like a book reading group or anything that involves writing, in some capacity, I think will help a writer. But I mean, I always say this, it's like, “So much of writing is not actually writing”.

You're interpreting, you're processing, you're thinking, you're contemplating, you're exposing yourselves to stuff. Even if I'm like walking in the park for like an hour, I consider that part of my practice that goes into writing because there's something that's going to happen there.

I won't know what it is, but it's going to open up something in me that will give me that kind of space for that; the thought that needs to come through to come through, if that makes sense.

GP: Totally, totally makes sense. And you know, it is interesting too, this sort of ties back to what you were talking about at the very beginning when you talked about your friend who's really into psychoanalysis and she pointed out what was at the heart of your book.

And I think sometimes because we are writing in isolation, we kind of don't get that outward perspective on the thing that we're writing about because we're so immersed in it. And I have this wonderful mentor who often says, you know, “You can't read the label if you're inside the bottle.”

So, you need to be able to be outside of the experience to really get a picture of what it is. And so, I think having a community is a way to get some people who can read the label for you and tell you like, “Actually, your book is really about that,” and give those types of insights.

NS: Yeah, I mean, I don't know what I would've done without early readers. You just need to like, once you have something like a draft, I think it's just good to share it with people and to not take things personally – but yeah, there's no way you're too in it.

And I also think having space from the work, like if I write a piece, an essay and I'm like, ‘Oh it's so good, it's so good.’ I'm like, I know not to send it in for another few days, because I know that if I sit with it and I visit it again in a few days, I'll probably change like half of it.

[laughter]

GP: I totally hear you on that. So, so many amazing insights during this conversation – now I want to know, what's coming up next for you?

NS: Well, besides the fact that I will be giving birth in the next two weeks, so I have a baby – so my second baby, my book was my first baby. I'm still-- I have a lot of different writing projects in my head. It'll take a while to get them onto paper, but I'm doing, you know, lots of personal essays and things like that to help promote Man Fast.

But I'm also becoming a health coach, which as you see in Chapter 2, I spent a lot of time studying Ayurveda. So, I'm going to start my own health coach practice in the fall, specifically for women who are trying to stay fertile longer or get pregnant in their late 30s and 40s; and I'm going to look at it all through an Ayurveda perspective.



So, that's the next, besides motherhood and health coaching; and then doing some freelance writing, I think that's going to be what I'm doing for the rest of the year, at least.

GP: I love it. And as someone who also had a baby-baby alongside a lot of other business stuff-- So, I found out I was pregnant with my first child about a week after I started DIY MFA. So, that was an interesting adventure.

But like, what I found is that even though you think that there's going to be less time, something about early motherhood, you find those nooks & crannies. Like you get really good at writing a lot during a five-minute nap. Yeah.

So, like, it's funny, like I was super productive when I had two really small children; and now, they're like grown and I'm like, 'What do I do with all my time?' So, yeah. Yay!

NS: So, I won't be able-- I won't procrastinate; that's good.

[laughter]

GP: At least, for me, it was like a survival mechanism. It just like kicked in because otherwise, I wouldn't have done anything but be at the mercy of the larva. So, anyway, I always like to end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

NS: Hold off editing as long as you can. You can always go back; just get it down, get it down, and don't question it while you're writing it. And don't think, 'Oh, are people going to think this sounds smart enough?'

Just get it down. Everything else can, you know, be fixed later. So, that's my advice. Just get it all down and then editing is the next step; don't edit while you write.

GP: I love it. And that's something that I definitely fall prey to myself. Oftentimes, I'll be like, 'What if I change this?' And I'm tweaking so much and then I like never get the words down, but you're totally, totally right. You can always go back and fix it later, but if there's no words on the page, you have nothing to fix.

NS: Right, exactly.

GP: Well, thank you so much for being here today, Natasha. It's been an absolute pleasure chatting with you.

NS: I've loved it. Thank you so much for having me.

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

