

## USES OF INSECURITY

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In his memoir *Scary Close: Dropping the Act and Finding True Intimacy*, author Donald Miller reflects upon his quest to dismantle the defense mechanisms and insecurities that he feels have impeded his ability to maintain satisfying interpersonal relationships. Through consultation with various people in his life and experiences on a group therapy retreat, Miller comes to the conclusion that many aspects of his personality are an act. He has developed this somewhat disingenuous shield over time to protect his innermost self from criticism, while also remaining likeable. It pains Miller to realize that though this extroverted shield draws people to him, it has inhibited him from achieving genuine honesty in his human connections and therefore, true meaning in his life. He reflects early in the memoir, "I don't trust people to accept who I am in process" (2). At this moment, Miller shares that his personal insecurities have misled him into believing that his authentic, unaltered self is not deserving of love and respect. This has caused him to shield his true self from people, to the detriment of his relationships. As Miller's therapeutic journey continues, his goal becomes to "dro[p] the act and begin to trust that being [him]self would be enough to get the love [he] needed" (35). In other words, he comes to understand and claim insecurity itself as his biggest weakness, a psychological and emotional obstacle to overcome in his pursuit of the freedom to be his authentic self in his relationships with the people cares for most.

In my experiences as an undergraduate social work student, I've been taught to acknowledge and highlight people's strengths before their weaknesses. In every position I've held or course I've taken related to social work, I have been reminded to do so in order to help the client feel safe and empowered. So when I read Miller's story, I reflexively think to myself (and would express to him, in a client-social worker relationship) that he is brave for being so honest about his struggles with authenticity. I think this before considering him to be selfish or cowardly for being disingenuous in the first

place. And as someone who absorbs Miller's personal narrative through this perspective, I actually see his work of actively grappling with his insecurities—as suffocating as they are for his emotional growth and confidence—as precisely what allows him to become beneficially self-aware. It is his act of questioning and communicating, without shame, the complexity of his self-doubt that has led Miller to examine his relationships and his emotional life in a fresh light, readier than ever to change. In this way, insecurity is not simply Miller's weakness. It is also a blessing or strength in disguise because it is the mechanism by which he can mobilize himself to make a healthy internal change and address his psycho-emotional needs with newfound focus and clarity.

Similarly, Stacey D'Erasmus explores the concept of insecurity and its value in her essay "The Uses of Doubt." She reflects upon doubt in the context of self-expression by detailing the value of an artist's self-doubt, coming to the perhaps counterintuitive conclusion that doubt, in all its complexity, is an incredibly powerful and even necessary motivator for quality self-expression. She frames her discussion around the following question: are artists more talented if they don't question their abilities, or can their doubts produce something uniquely meaningful?

To explore her thoughts surrounding the question of doubt's necessity, D'Erasmus starts by defining what doubt means to her in the context of writing, her own art form of choice. She argues that doubt "is a pedagogy of shame" and therefore "knows the stakes of speaking" (23). To D'Erasmus, feeling doubtful or insecure about your inclination to speak is really just emblematic of an awareness that what you are about to say is worth expressing. Doubt indicates that there is something to lose, and therefore can inspire a tremendous and mindful effort that total confidence might not. "Doubt is like a divining rod," she explains: "it begins to tug when it nears something fertile and fluid and underground" (24). In other words, we often doubt our ability to do what we really care about doing well, which maybe means we are doing something special—something that matters.

D'Erasmus furthers her opinion specifically in the context of her experiences as a member of oppressed social groups that have historically been silenced in the literary canon: women and the LGBTQ community. She

explains the significance of doubt and its relationship to minority voices when she argues:

Doubt is the prickly awareness that you are seizing the means of production of meaning and that you don't have the right to seize them. But that's exactly the point: you don't have the right. The means of production of meaning do not belong to you. And if you are black, female, queer, peculiar, or whatever, you will be even more aware that you are taking what does not belong to you, and you will probably feel that much more doubt because you have that much more to remember—and because the cultural imperative to forget or not say what you remember is that much more forceful. (23-24)

Here, D'Erasmus comes to the hearty conclusion that opposition or oppression raises “the stakes” of self-expression, which is why writing or any other expression fueled by (or produced in spite of) self-doubt and insecurity born from being oppressed, silenced, or questioned is so uniquely powerful. In this way, doubt should be embraced as a motivator and a reminder that the complexity of being insecure can ultimately be more interesting or provocative than the certainty of a writer who has never had to question herself or the validity of her voice and place in the world.

So while Donald Miller believes that his insecurities are a major hindrance, D'Erasmus believes that hers are a source of inspired motivation. She uniquely claims her self-doubt and insecurity as valuable tools. What does D'Erasmus do in her writing that Miller did not do before reflecting on his life in his memoir? How is D'Erasmus able to turn such a negative, constricting force like insecurity into a productive resource? What does one have to do in order to transform incredible insecurity into a point of strength rather than a debilitating weakness? D'Erasmus offers insight into these questions as she, like Miller, does not hide the fact that she feels insecure. But she wrestles with this truth out in the open. Rather than hiding her insecurities and trying to completely overcome them, she embraces and openly communicates about them, vocalizing their implications in her life and in her craft. She takes the negative power out of her self-doubt by re-claiming and re-focusing it with intention—all with a remarkable degree of honesty that Miller admits he initially struggled to achieve. D'Erasmus's work complicates Miller's ideas by illustrating that insecurity can be manipulated into a productive, motivating

force through an honest embracing and communicating of our uncertainties and their implications. In this way, insecurity or self-doubt can ultimately become a source of emotional strength.

While it is true that social work practice is structured around helping people identify their strengths during times of struggle, this objective wouldn't be possible if social workers didn't understand the gravity of insecurity's consequences in the face of hardships or personal weaknesses. This past January, I had the opportunity to work as a social work intern in a legal office alongside a team of attorneys and other social workers on a juvenile delinquency case. Our client was a 17-year-old who had lived a difficult life (to say the least): he was born into an environment of poverty and violence, raised in a broken home that couldn't meet his needs, and was repeatedly neglected and roughed up as a child. He lacked support, received a sub-par education, and started acting out and picking up minor criminal charges at a very young age. Rejected by his family, rejected by his school, he was moved between group homes and juvenile halls, leaving him with the immense personal baggage of instability, distrust for others, and inability to advocate for himself. When I went to meet him in juvenile hall, it became clear to me that this young person was just like any other young person—wanting the best for himself, his future, and his family. At the time, I was helping my supervisors with their latest initiative for this particular client, which was to tell the court that he was finally ready to leave juvenile hall and come home. So we asked him to help advocate his case and give us evidence as to why this time was different, why he was ready to change.

I remember the young client explaining that he honestly wanted to turn his life around, and he would do whatever was necessary to accomplish that. But he also confided in us that he was finding it hard to try anymore: "I keep doing my best, but it doesn't work. So why keep trying? I mean I'll do whatever, but I don't feel like anything will ever change." When we tried to encourage him by reminding him that his academics had been improving greatly, he seemed genuinely appreciative of the praise but didn't seem to believe it. When we reminded him that his therapist had been saying kind things about him, he responded by smiling but admitting that the therapist was "probably just saying that" because he hated talking about himself.

What I observed in my brief time working and interacting with this client was that he had never, in his whole life, been properly encouraged. His confidence and potential had never been nourished or supported. From early on he had been labeled a hopeless criminal, and he has been treated as such to this day. He had never been taught that he deserved better, that he could do better. It was heartbreaking to realize that for him, insecurity, shame, and self-doubt were all incredibly debilitating obstacles that he had never been given the tools to overcome. My supervisor and I continually reminded him of his strengths, but it was too late for him to forget that no one else in his life had done so. His deep lack of self-confidence, agency, and his internalized shame kept him from believing he could change his circumstances, or, sometimes, just get through the day.

In a compiled German psychology study on the relationship between self-doubt and cognitive interference called *Cognitive Interference*, researcher Ralf Schwarzer agrees that self-doubt can actually function as a significant obstacle to our decisions and positive actions. Schwarzer explains how “the decision to invest effort, time, and other resources . . . relies heavily on the confidence in the ability to perform the critical action successfully.” He cites many different theorists who assert that self-doubt creates a quantifiable disruption in our decision-making and abilities to pursue certain actions or goals: “[i]ndividuals who are plagued by self-doubts procrastinate difficult decisions, fail to develop challenging intentions, and get stuck in a fruitless contemplation process” (Schwarzer). I realize, as Schwarzer and my juvenile delinquency client remind me, that it would be irresponsible and naïve to completely dismiss insecurity’s crushing effects in favor of finding some silver linings in it.

Miller’s insecurity keeps him from intimacy, my juvenile delinquency client’s insecurity keeps him from changing his life for the better, and Schwarzer’s research shows that self-doubt quantifiably inhibits us. Without denying the negative and sometimes devastating effects of being insecure, or romanticizing D’Erasmus’s vision of insecurity as a gift, how can we understand how to make use of our insecurities? No matter who we are, feeling insecure and “not good enough” are fundamentally human experiences. I appreciate D’Erasmus’s ideas about wholeheartedly embracing insecurity for what it is, and I think she is on to something with her ability to be honest in

communicating her reasons for doubting herself. Maybe there is a way to embrace insecurity and internal pain even further. Maybe to do so, we have to not only embrace it in ourselves, but also mutually communicate with others and seek out their stories—of pain, insecurity, self-doubt, shame, whatever it may be—in order to see that we are not alone.

In the introduction to her collection of essays *The Empathy Exams*, Leslie Jamison explores the human phenomenon of identifying with another person's pain in the context of her work as a "Medical Actor," which requires her to act out a variety of health-related symptoms in simulations designed to train medical students in their bedside manner and diagnostic ability. Jamison learns that doctors are expected to display a particular kind and amount of empathy in any given interaction with a patient. She seems to find this expectation interesting, especially as she grapples with her personal experiences of physical and emotional pain, and the empathy, or lack thereof, she receives from the people in her life.

Jamison intimately and honestly describes the circumstances surrounding her abortion. She uses this story to complicate our understanding of our own emotions and how we must grapple with them in order to survive. She experiences an immense mix of shame and pain, and she is struck by even the most empathetic doctor's inability to truly empathize with her without the full context that shapes her story. She at first is frustrated with the lack of clarity while coping with her emotional pain, but she comes to terms with the fact that her emotions and responses to them will never be perfectly clear-cut or black-and-white: "[t]his was the double blade of how I felt about anything that hurt: I wanted someone to feel it with me, and also I wanted it entirely for myself" (Jamison 126). This imperfection and complexity, for better or for worse, is what makes Jamison so relatable, authentic, and human. Her ideas about empathy shine a new light on the topic of how to handle insecurity, because as she grapples with understanding the nuances of communication and shame, she learns to define empathy in a way that relates to the questions raised by Miller and D'Erasmus's work. Jamison, like D'Erasmus, seems to advocate for communication that embraces complexity and uncertainty. Jamison's vision of empathy hides nothing, just as D'Erasmus celebrates her self-doubt out in the open. Jamison argues, "[e]mpathy [is] figuring out how to bring difficulty into the light so it can be seen at all . . . Empathy requires

inquiry . . . Empathy requires knowing you know nothing” (124). Jamison tells us how to make empathy successful, and D’Erasmus tells us how to make self-doubt successful. Both require authentic communication and acceptance of imperfection.

Why do authentic, mutual communication and embraced insecurity have the potential to be so powerful? I think about this in the context of my recent experiences partnering with a New York City public high school student for joint writing projects. I get along with my partner Kaitlyn very well—she is sweet, open-minded, easygoing, and thoughtful. I don’t know much about her, but from what she has shared I do know that she and I come from very different backgrounds. Hers includes a mom who gave birth to her at 16-years-old, and an absent father. She explains that her hardships at home are surely challenging but also are a source of personal motivation. We not only talk about her family but also her friends, boys she likes, and her hopes for the future.

I appreciate that she feels comfortable being so candid with me, and I realize that what has connected the two of us—two young girls from two different worlds—isn’t the fact that I am a social work student who seeks to make her feel safe and empowered. It isn’t the fact that she has overcome all of her personal roadblocks and meets me with a carefully constructed confidence that she assumes I expect of her. What connects us is that we mutually share stories of our insecurities. Kaitlyn is so honest with me, and that helps me be honest with her. She shares with me that she feels she cannot trust people because she has a history of loved ones taking advantage of her. I share with her that I feel guilty that I grew up with my grandparents, and my little brother does not. She shares that her mom is her biggest hero, but she fears she’ll be a disappointment. I share that I am afraid for the future. Kaitlyn says that she is too.

In my interactions with Kaitlyn, neither of us has overcome our insecurities and swapped them for confidence. We did not dwell on the negative, and we didn’t seek to solve anything. But our insecurities turned into a positive force for our relationship simply because we both vocalized, openly and honestly, the implications of our negative emotions. We helped each other see Miller’s point, that insecurity is universal, and realizing that we shared that feeling of self-doubt made each of us feel more comfortable with

ourselves. Accepting yourself means accepting your insecurities too and neither solely discrediting the pain they cause nor revering the ways in which they help us grow. Acceptance requires both. It requires embracing complexity but not doing so alone; it requires partnership and Jamison's "enter[ing] another person's pain" (124). Insecurity does not become a strength on its own, it takes work—work that is honest, unafraid to be complex, and shared.

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#### WORKS CITED

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